

THE
BATTLE OF FLANDERS
1940

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

The following narrative, which is based upon Lord Gort's Official Despatches, is an attempt to describe, in as untechnical language as possible, the experiences of the B.E.F. from the time of their landing in France in September, 1939, to the final evacuation of Dunkirk on 3rd June, 1940.

I have gone beyond Lord Gort's text in at least two respects. I have offered certain comments, which Lord Gort has punctiliously refrained from doing; and I have included in my story certain incidents which, since they did not occur under Lord Gort's official jurisdiction, are not included in his Despatches, but will I hope be of interest to the general reader.

FOREWORD

Perspective in Warfare

IN ALL WARS the final victory must be won on land. However irresistible the armed forces of a country may show themselves by sea or in the air, the naval and aerial arms can never strike the decisive blow. They can guard and protect on the one hand, devastate, cower, and paralyse on the other, but they cannot break through the last lines of defence. That task must be left to the tanks and their supporting infantry.

The importance of an early success or failure cannot therefore be estimated at once; there must be an interval of waiting until it can be fitted into the final pattern—it may be years later. Of what value were Marengo or Austerlitz to Napoleon the day after Waterloo was fought?

The British Army, by traditional usage, always seems to be compelled to start a war from small beginnings, and either play for time or take desperate risks until it has built itself up into an effective striking force. The entire history of that Army is chequered with tales of early reverse or expensive resistances, redeemed in the end, as resources and experience accumulated, by the final crown of victory.

This is due partly to the fact that though we have usually been prepared to maintain a Navy second to none, and came recently to a similar though somewhat tardy conclusion upon the subject of an Air Force, we have systematically starved our Army throughout its history, both in numbers, equipment, and adequate means of training; and partly because, whenever we embark upon one of our periodical and hasty campaigns for national preparedness, the Royal Navy and Royal Air Force must of necessity be served first; for it is they who must guard our shores and skies until the final arbiter, the Army, is ready. And this usually means a wait of two years. In the last war we could not really put our full military strength into the field until 1st July, 1916, when, at long last, a highly trained and fully equipped British Army went raging into the Battle of the Somme.

Military science never stands still. No sooner is a new weapon of offence forged than an effective means of defence is devised against it. Sometimes, therefore, the advantage inclines one way, sometimes the other. In the Great War, it lay in the main upon the side of the defence; the battles of Verdun and Passchendaele are grim witnesses to the fact.

But to-day the beam has tipped the other way. The stoutest trench and pill-box system of 1918 would find itself helpless against a foe equipped in overwhelming strength with swift armoured fighting vehicles and possessed of the command of the air.

That is the moral and the lesson of Lord Gort's Despatches. They tell a tale to stir the pulse and rend the heart at the same moment—a tale of almost incredible gallantry, resource, and fortitude, hampered at every turn from the very outset by lack of adequate numbers and essential equipment. There were other difficulties too, almost inseparable from the operations of allied forces who find themselves matched, without previous rehearsal, against the natural dispositions of a single powerful enemy.

But a Commander-in-Chief in his Despatch does not discuss such considerations. He limits himself severely to a plain description of his own dispositions and of the operations which followed them. Criticism, whether of his superiors or his associates, he rigorously avoids. Neither does he seek excuses for himself, though Lord Gort might have stated with perfect truth that the fate of the B.E.F. was sealed, almost from the start of the 1940 campaign, by a break-through many miles from its own front, and not by any failure of British troops to hold positions of their own choosing.

But it is sometimes permissible to read between the lines.

The Flanders campaign of 1940 was a tragedy, redeemed by a heroic, superhuman conclusion, but a tragedy for all that, especially for France. Yet ourselves it must inspire with hope, for it showed us plainly that man for man our soldiers were superior to those of the enemy, and, when similarly equipped, must inevitably prove their masters.

The day of victory is not yet, and may not fall for some time; for we have learned a lesson, and that is that until we have consolidated our command of the air and endowed our young and spirited armies with the mechanised aid that they require, the decisive blow can not be struck.

So we must wait, with fortitude and patience until, by the unremitting effort of the men and women of the factory and forge at home and throughout the Empire, these vital necessities are forthcoming and we can put forth our full strength.

When that victory is won, but not till then, the Flanders campaign of 1940 will fall into its true perspective—of as gallant a contribution to ultimate victory as Gallipoli or Corunna.

CHAPTER I

FLANDERS ONCE MORE

I

The Move Overseas

A WAR MUST ALWAYS provoke comparison with its immediate predecessor. There must have been many of us in September, 1939, whose memories turned back to those fateful weeks in August, 1914, when the British Expeditionary Force, thanks to perfect co-operation between our naval and military staffs, were conveyed swiftly and securely across the Channel, without the loss of a man, to immediate participation in the Battle of Mons.

Could that feat be repeated, we asked, under modern conditions?

It could, and was, despite new and unfamiliar difficulties.

Two of these were outstanding. The first was the possibility—the certainty, it seemed—of an overwhelming attack upon our transports from the air. The second was the fact that animals had been totally replaced by mechanical vehicles, and this presented a new and, quite literally, most weighty problem in transportation.

In the first case the most pressing essential was secrecy, and this had been successfully maintained for many weeks, while detailed and complex plans were prepared and carried out in peacetime. The agencies concerned were the War Office, the Admiralty, the Board of Trade, and the French Naval, Military and Civil authorities, working together in silent efficiency and loyal accord.

Further security was ensured by the selection of landing ports as remote as possible from the German air-bases. Calais and Boulogne were held to be out of the question this time, so Cherbourg was selected as a landing place for the troops, and Brest, Nantes, and St. Nazaire for their stores and vehicles. Nantes stands some thirty-five miles up the estuary of the Loire; St. Nazaire, at its mouth in the Bay of Biscay, was converted during the last war from a modest coastal village into a

considerable landing-port and base for the use of the American Expeditionary Force ; so suited our purpose well.

So well in hand were our preparations in September, 1939, that within a week of the outbreak of war these ports were ready for the reception of the British Expeditionary Force. Advance units were on the spot even earlier, to organise docking and transportation arrangements. These units were in the main recruited from the port authorities in Great Britain, and most efficient they proved themselves.

Anti-aircraft defences and hospital accommodation had also to be provided, for we had good reason to expect that disembarkation might have to take place under intensive interference from enemy bombers.

So expeditiously were all these preliminary tasks performed that the move of the Expeditionary Force as a whole to France was able to begin upon 10th September, one week after the declaration of war. They arrived safely on schedule time.

"Drivers and vehicles," we are told, "were on the road for long periods; but their duty was lightened by the hospitality of the French inhabitants, which all ranks will recall with gratitude". There is a pleasantly familiar ring about that statement.

Upon the 13th September Lord Gort himself, as Commander-in-Chief, left the War Office for Camberley, where his General Headquarters was forming, and upon the following day followed his men overseas. He sailed in H.M.S. "Skate", and was accompanied by Lt. General Sir John Dill, Commander of the 1st Corps, and his own personal staff. Upon landing at Cherbourg he proceeded by car to the Chateau de la Blanchardière, Le Mans, which had been placed at his disposal by the French Government.

II

The New Factor

IN ONE RESPECT THE NEWLY arrived B.E.F. enjoyed an advantage denied to its predecessor of 1914: it had ample time to assemble and reorganise after disembarkation; whereas twenty-four years earlier our troops had been hurried into action as they set foot upon the soil of France.

Perhaps this was just as well, for the Staff now encountered a problem destined hereafter to add considerably to the difficulties of communication—a problem arising from the necessity of *dispersion*.

As we all know to our cost, the bombing aeroplane has completely revolutionised not only the operational but the administrative side of war; and with it, what may be called the recreational or social side.

In the last war troops were either in action or back at rest ; and when they were back at rest they really rested. Thousands of middle-aged and elderly Britons can recall to-day grateful memories of pleasant billets in Bethune, or Bailleul, or Arras, or of innumerable friendly villages and farm-houses scattered behind the line, where exhausted units could make good their deficiencies and recruit their energy. But to-day all that is gone. There are no real rest areas anywhere. Troops can no longer congregate in centres of population ; they must be dispersed in small contingents all over the countryside, separated from their nearest neighbours by a mile or so of field and plough, wrapped by night in an impenetrable black-out.

The same restrictions are imposed upon the activities of the Staff, for in the case of G.H.Q., the brain and directing force of the whole Army, it is obviously unsafe to keep all your eggs in one basket. When G.H.Q. established itself at Arras, it was found advisable to quarter the Commander-in-Chief and his principal Staff Officers each in separate billets some miles apart. This meant that whenever a conference had to be held, valuable time was taken up in travelling, or in a struggle with that most exasperating of instruments, the field telephone.

This handicap of enforced dispersion made itself felt from the very beginning. Laval and Le Mans were fifty miles apart, and the base ports three times that distance. Despite the cordial help of the French authorities, telephonic communication never proved satisfactory, quite apart from the danger of a breach of security involved. It was found by Commanders and Staff that satisfactory control could only be ensured by personal visits. All this meant a further waste of time on the road.

Dispersion of vehicles and transport in general also involved a loss of time in their assembly—and in war, time is frequently the supreme factor.

These handicaps were not of course insuperable, neither were they suffered by the B.E.F. alone. They were imposed impartially upon both sides by modern conditions of warfare. Moreover, the months of comparative tranquillity which followed gave to our young and inexperienced Army breathing space in which to accustom itself to its new problems.

III

The British Sector

BY 21ST SEPTEMBER the concentration of the General Headquarters Staff and of the essential Lines of Communication units was accomplished. Next day the troops themselves began to arrive—units of 1st Corps. On

22nd September Lord Gort left Le Mans for Amiens. At Mantes-sur-Seine he was handed a telegram from General Georges, Commander of the French Front of the North East, indicating the location and extent of frontage which it was desired that the British Expeditionary Force should take over.

Lord Gort, it should be noted, was acting under the direct control of General Georges, while General Georges himself served under General Gamelin, in supreme command of the Allied Forces in France.

After a reconnaissance of the allotted sector, Lord Gort visited General Georges at Grand Quartier General upon 26th September, accompanied by his Chief of the General Staff, Lt.-General H. R. Pownall. He agreed to take over the sector proposed, which followed the Belgian frontier for some fifty-five miles, beginning at Maulde on the right and running roughly northward to Halluin (immediately south of Menin on the Lille-Menin road), turning thence in a southwesterly direction along the River Lys—a name familiar to many a British soldier of the last war—as far as even more familiar Armentières. Within the salient formed, and protected by it, lay Roubaix, Tourcoing and the great city of Lille.

As the British Expeditionary Force only consisted so far of four Divisions, a French Division, the 51st, was included in Lord Gort's command.

At General Georges' express desire, Lord Gort did not wait for the arrival of his entire present Force in its concentration area, but agreed to move 1st Corps into the line without delay, in the sector running north from Maulde. They were to be in position by 5th October, and General Georges was informed that 2nd Corps would join them a week later.

IV

A Great Troop Movement

NOW CAME THE TASK of moving 1st Corps from its assembly area to the Belgian frontier, a distance of no less than two hundred and fifty miles.

Tanks, tracked vehicles, and slow-moving artillery were despatched by train; the remainder of the Force proceeded by three parallel routes. Three days were allotted for the move of each formation. Two "Staging areas" were arranged on each road, south of the Somme and Seine respectively. Anti-aircraft protection was provided at each crossing—another pregnant sign of the times.

It will be interesting for a moment to examine the composition of this vast and novel cavalcade. ("Cavalcade" is a misnomer in itself, for there were no horses in the British Expeditionary Force of 1939-40, except some transport animals brought later from India.) Five hundred vehicles moved daily over each stage of the route, maintaining a prudent interval of one hundred yards between vehicles. The first stage was one hundred and twenty miles, and a halt of one day was made at the end of it for purposes of maintenance and overhaul. It was found that the vehicles had stood up well, and breakdowns were few.

However, various valuable lessons were learnt. The drivers became accustomed to the novel sensation of keeping to the right-hand side of the road. A French-speaking British officer, acting in liaison with the French road authorities, proved of great value. The advisability, too, was driven home of early reconnaissance of staging-areas, and of control at the dispersal points.

Upon 3rd October, the agreed date, after "the largest road movement ever undertaken with motor transport by any British Army," 1st Corps took over from the French the sector Maulde-Grisson on the Belgian frontier. This sector lay between that of the 1st French Army and 16th French Corps.

Our own 1st Corps consisted at this time of the 1st Division (Major General the Hon. H. R. L. G. Alexander) who occupied the left of the sector, and the 2nd (Major General H. C. Loyd) who occupied the right. Lord Gort himself established his headquarters in familiar and friendly surroundings at Arras—or rather, once again in deference to the need of dispersion, at a château in the tiny village of Habarcq, eight miles west—upon 2nd October.

On 12th October, as previously undertaken, 2nd Corps began to arrive from Le Mans, and the 3rd Division (Major General B. L. Montgomery) moved into the line between Bouvines and Lannoy. The 4th Division (Major General D. G. Johnson, V.C.) was located in General Headquarters reserve.

1st and 2nd Corps having thus punctually arrived at their allotted positions, embarked upon their duties at once.

These proved to be no sinecure, consisting as they did of helping in the construction of the elaborate defensive works designed to protect the frontier of France from the northern end of the Maginot Line to the North Sea.

In this connexion the French High Command have been criticised as having been too "Maginot minded". Still, it is possible to organise a

strong defensive scheme without entirely eliminating the intention to attack. In any case it is reasonable to suppose that if the Maginot Line and the Belgian Frontier defences had ever been given the opportunity, as a completed and occupied whole, to serve the purpose for which they had been designed, the history of 1940 might have been written differently. But—in the grammar of war conditional sentences have no status.

V

In the Line

THE ESSENTIAL FEATURE of modern defence is defence in depth, with special provision of effective tank obstacles.

Such an obstacle was already in existence when 1st Corps took over. It consisted of an almost continuous ditch, covered by concrete block-houses built to accommodate anti-tank and machine guns. By previous arrangement, certain French technical troops continued to work in the sector under the command of the French Commander of the Defensive Sector of Lille, Colonel Bertschi.

But of course these works were a mere beginning. It was decided to organise three main defence positions—namely, the existing frontier position, a Corps reserve position extending across the base of the Lille salient, and further in rear a position following the line of the Haute-Deule, Sensée-La Bassée Canals.

This involved the construction of an elaborate system of field defences, including "pill-boxes", to afford protection to those weapons which formed the backbone of fire-defence throughout the whole depth of the positions. To save time, these pill-boxes were so standardised as to accommodate both British and French weapons.

Here then was work in plenty for all, and of a most intensive character, for none could know how much time was available. Work upon the pill-boxes was immediately begun by the Royal Engineers, assisted by other arms. In addition, a specially constituted force composed of twelve field companies of the Royal Engineers (drawn from Territorial Army Divisions at home) known as X Force, arrived early in November, accompanied by certain sturdy companies of the recently established Auxiliary Military Pioneer Corps.

It was a hard winter. The weather in October and November was wet and stormy, and work later on was delayed by a long series of frosts. But by the end of January the position had been developed to a considerable depth—pill-boxes completed, wire erected, and many miles of anti-tank ditches dug.

VI

The Saar Detachment

ALL THIS TIME OUR TROOPS had been employed in the main upon purely manual labour, many miles from the theatre of hostilities. Obviously such employment, however necessary, is not calculated to inculcate in the soldier either mental alertness or a fighting spirit.

It was therefore agreed between Lord Gort and General Georges that in order to give the British Force, so far as was possible, some preliminary experience of actual contact with the enemy, British troops should be transferred to the Saar front and permanently maintained there in rotation, to the strength of an Infantry Brigade, under the command of a French Division.

Accordingly, upon 4th December, such a Brigade took over a sector from the French 42nd Division. Here the fortifications of the Maginot Line, manned of course by French troops, were situated to rearward of them; the enemy positions lay on an average some fifteen hundred yards from our foremost posts. Our battalions were, as usual, arranged in depth.

Here was ample manoeuvring and patrolling ground, and full advantage was taken of the opportunities which it offered. Raids between our own troops and those of the enemy began immediately, and increased in intensity with varying fortune on either side, and many important and at times salutary lessons were learned by our young soldiers.

"Since that date" (4th December) says Lord Gort in his first despatch dealing with events before the opening of the great battle, "infantry brigades of the British Expeditionary Force have successively completed short tours of duty in the sector, and junior leaders have thus had valuable training, in their day to day duties, when in contact with the enemy."

Incidentally, it is in the description of these operations that mention is first made of that extremely useful weapon the Tommy gun—more respectfully described here, however, as the sub-machine gun.

It will be appropriate to add in this connexion that the Saar front Infantry Brigade ultimately grew into a Division, complete with attached troops, including cavalry, machine guns, and pioneers. (The term cavalry, here and hereafter, must be understood to denote armoured fighting vehicles.) Our 51st Division was selected for this purpose, and upon 7th May relieved the 7th French Division on a front of 12,000 yards, from Guerstling to Remeling.

This Division, as we shall see, was destined not to return to Lord Gort's direct control, nor to take part in the operations with which this narrative is concerned.

VII

The B.E.F. grows

BUT WE HAVE BEEN anticipating a little. Let us return to our dispositions along the Belgian frontier.

So far 1st and 2nd Corps had consisted of two Divisions each, the 1st and 2nd, and 3rd and 4th respectively. Additional units arrived during October and November, including elements of the 5th and 6th Divisions, in the form of the 15th and 17th Infantry Brigades. Lord Gort was now able to complete the 5th Division (Major General H. E. Franklyn), and presently it became possible to man the British sector entirely with British troops. Accordingly the French 51st Division and the British Expeditionary Force dissolved partnership, with many expressions of friendly regret, upon 1st December, 1939.

The arrival of the 48th Division (Major General A. F. A. N. Thorne) in January completed the establishment of the first contingent of the British Expeditionary Force, which now consisted of two corps of three divisions each, with corps and army troops.

At the end of January the strength of the Force stood at 222,200 of all ranks, not including the Air Component and other units of the Royal Air Force for whose maintenance the Commander-in-Chief of the British Expeditionary Force was responsible.

VIII

The Air

IN MODERN WARFARE operations by land and in the air must be closely co-ordinated, whether for attack or defence. For this reason the British Expeditionary Force included a Component (to employ the accepted term) of the Royal Air Force, under Air Vice Marshal C. H. B. Blount. This at first consisted of two Army Co-operation Wings, one Fighter Wing, and one Bomber Reconnaissance Wing. These aircraft were flown out to France at the outbreak of war, and came under Lord Gort's command from the dates of the disembarkation of their ground units. Other units were added later.

Anti-aircraft units, too, were early on the scene, having been disembarked at the base ports on 14th and 15th September, in conjunction with fighter units of the Royal Air Force, in order to protect the landing

and forward moves of 1st and 2nd Corps. Thereafter our available anti-aircraft resources were divided between forward defences and Lines of Communication. A searchlight zone was also established, as a protection against enemy night bombing.

Until the necessary aerodromes could be constructed, the Royal Air Force was largely dependent for accommodation upon French hospitality. This, needless to say, was freely forthcoming, together with every other kind of help, as is gratefully acknowledged in the Despatch.

As for the aerodromes themselves, it had already been decided that all aerodromes used by the Royal Air Force in France should be constructed and maintained by the British Expeditionary Force, together with their signal communications. It was soon evident that the magnitude of this task had been underestimated. There is little firm turf in France, and concrete runways were found to be indispensable in most areas. Special units of the Royal Engineers had therefore to be raised to construct these.

The actual duties of the Royal Air Force during this long period of waiting and preparation were confined for the most part to air reconnaissance, upon a strategical plan worked out in conjunction with our own Air Ministry and General Monchard, commanding the Air Forces with the French Armies of the North East. The work was extremely arduous, for owing to our scrupulous observance of international law, our aircraft never flew over neutral territory, and this involved them in very long detours, usually at a great height and in the face of enemy opposition.

"But," says Lord Gort, "this rigorous duty has been boldly and cheerfully undertaken. Much photography has been undertaken with useful results, both in information obtained and in experience gained of photographic and survey methods."

He was right. Certainly this period of semi-activity was furnishing our young men, whether on the ground or in the air, with an invaluable opportunity to educate themselves for the stern tests which lay ahead of them.

IX

Problems of Administration

EVERY WAR PRODUCES its own perplexities, and Lord Gort soon found himself confronted with problems some of which had not been foreseen, while the seriousness of others had been underestimated.

The outstanding difficulty was that of Security—of maintaining the necessary secrecy regarding our strength and dispositions.

The great Duke of Wellington once said that victory in battle lies with the leader who can guess correctly what is going on upon the other side.

of the hill. But to-day no guessing is required. Not only is the other side of the hill open to inspection, but the whole face of nature. The slightest troop movement or concentration can be detected from the air and immediately communicated by wireless to the parties most interested. More than that; where modern telegraph systems are concerned, the longest way round is frequently the shortest way home. At any moment some indiscreet item of news may slip past the censor, cross the Atlantic, be published in New York, and recabled to Germany an hour later.

In our case there was no need for information of interest to the enemy to follow any such circuitous route. In the autumn of 1939 thousands of Belgians were working upon the beet-harvest of Northern France, right in the British zone, and an average of at least twenty thousand local inhabitants crossed and recrossed the frontier daily, upon their more or less lawful occasions.

It was obviously impossible to keep tally of this mixed multitude, especially since the French frontier control officials had been seriously reduced in numbers upon mobilisation. Those available, together with our Field Security Police, did their best, a very efficient best; but it was manifestly impossible to stop all leaks.

In modern warfare too, especially during periods of comparative inaction, the postal censorship must keep its eyes wide open. This was particularly necessary in the British zone during the winter of 1939-40, for Thomas Atkins, incited thereto perhaps by the tranquil and somewhat monotonous surroundings in which he found himself, developed a passion for correspondence on a scale which had not been entirely foreseen. In view of the abnormally large numbers of letters despatched daily it was found necessary to make a considerable increase in the censorship personnel.

X

The Rearward Areas

DESPITE THE LACK of immediate active operations, the British Expeditionary Force, as we have seen, was kept busy enough during these winter months. Not only had every effort to be made to render the northern defences secure, but long-term plans had to be put into execution for the accommodating and training of future contingents.

Here it was found necessary to enlarge upon the original plan. Maintenance depôts had already been established at Brest and Nantes; but in view of the extreme length of our lines of communication it soon became apparent that an advanced base must be established. Havre was selected,

and Field Supply Depôts were set up further forward. By mid-December the staff of the Movement Control were operating some ninety stations, while fourteen ports were in active use. Through these ports passed a quarter of a million men, forty-five thousand mechanical vehicles, and a monthly tonnage of sixty to one hundred thousand tons of stores.

Works projects were put in hand everywhere. From the bases to the forward line huts and buildings began to spring up; hospitals and reinforcement camps were put in hand, and electric power installed.

The supply of labour was a perpetual problem. French civilian labour, owing to mobilisation, was practically unobtainable, and the bulk of the work fell upon cavalry and infantry reservists. Later, the Pioneer Corps absorbed the units already in France.

All these activities were under the general control of the G.O.C. Lines of Communication Area, the late Major General P. de Fonblanque. They covered almost a third of France, stretching from Dunkirk to Brest and from Cherbourg to Marseilles.

Despite these preoccupations, the training of the Force for active operations never ceased. Thanks to the co-operation of the French Army, artillery practice camps were established and many other training facilities provided.

Eight hundred and fifty officers and men were sent home in the course of the winter as instructors, to assist in the training of the new formations, and an equal number from home were attached to the Force for instruction.

The shortage of officers was being acutely felt about this time. Four hundred candidates, mostly Warrant Officers, Class III, were recommended for immediate commissions, and another four hundred sent home for the necessary training as such.

Telling the World

XI

THE NEED FOR PUBLICITY and propaganda, those most potent weapons of modern warfare, furnished a complete set of thorny problems of their own to the Director of Military Intelligence and his staff at General Headquarters. These were shared with the Department of Public Relations at the War Office.

There was urgent need, for instance, of countering German propaganda among the French troops themselves—the well-worn suggestion that while French soldiers toiled and bled in the forward line, the British Army was taking its ease in the rearward areas and diverting itself with French wives and daughters. Much was done in this direction through

the medium of the British Mission at Grand Quartier General, under Brigadier J. G. des R. Swayne, and its opposite number at our own General Headquarters, under General de Division Voruz, to whom Lord Gort pays warm tribute.

Then there was the problem of a public at home clamouring for news, and of the war-correspondent, the broadcaster, and the camera-man at General Headquarters itself.

"The significance and requirements of the press," says the Despatch, "and of press and cinematographic publicity in the field in modern war, have proved greater than was anticipated prior to the outbreak of hostilities."

It need hardly be said that the extent of these requirements had never been underestimated by the Press itself. Indeed the difficulty was to keep these requirements within reasonable bounds. Every newspaper, every broadcasting corporation, every news-reel agency—each demanded its representative at General Headquarters. Had all been permitted to come who wished, the ancient city of Arras could not have contained them—unless the Army had moved out.

Finally, and properly, the selection of accredited representatives was left to the Newspaper Proprietors Association in London, who performed their highly invidious task with tact and discretion. The B.B.C., of course, sent its own official representatives, and five news-reel companies each contributed a unit.

Correspondents disappointed of a place in the quota were subsequently brought out from home upon periodical conducted tours.

In all, some fifty-five war correspondents were permanently accredited to the British Expeditionary Force. They were divided into sections, each under military conducting-officers selected by the Department of Public Relations at the War Office, and working under a local Assistant Director of Public Relations, who was himself responsible to the Director of Military Intelligence at General Headquarters.

The American correspondents, who had been allotted a generous quota, were gratified to find themselves placed in a section of their own, and not mingled with the other "neutrals."

All concerned were naturally irked for many months by the lack of exciting operations and the perpetual demands of some of their employers for "hot news." It is strange to remember now that there was at this time a good deal of criticism in certain quarters of "this phoney war." One American correspondent indeed was heard to complain that in the

opinion of his employer the war was not being "put over at its full entertainment value."

However, these impatient scribes were destined before long to taste actual war conditions—and right gallantly they rose to the adventure.

XII

A Contrast

IN GERMANY, it may be interesting but not surprising to note, they do these things differently. War correspondents, war artists, cameramen, broadcasters—all are enlisted in the Army, and serve under military discipline. They go into action carrying the tools of their trade, and when (and if) they come out, they publish their impressions to the world; or rather, they hand them to Dr. Goebbels, who edits them to his own liking and passes them on, in uniform and stereotyped form, to the German Press.

It is a convenient and businesslike method of reporting a war, but unfortunately impracticable in countries where the press is free, and variety of individual opinion is the breath of public life.

XIII

Unbending the Bow

"WELFARE" IS A NEW TERM in Army language. It covers the provision of recreation, sport, entertainment and comforts, both bodily and spiritual—all the *imponderabilia*, in fact, which make the difference between inspirational and mechanical obedience—between a Damascus blade and a broomstick.

There was considerable need for these beneficent activities in the British Expeditionary Force, for its composition and outlook were different from those of its predecessors. It was a much more highly educated Force, and educated people can never find recreation in mere idleness: they require something for their minds to bite on, all the time.

Their general health had been good. Despite severe weather conditions, the number of troops in the care of medical units had never exceeded 2.8 per cent. of the strength of the Force.

First in every soldier's thoughts and hopes comes the question of leave, and by the middle of December it was found possible to declare leave

"open." By the end of January ten days' leave home had been enjoyed by some sixty thousand of all ranks, apart from many cases of "compassionate" leave.

Some ninety Expeditionary Force (or "Naafi") Institutes were established along the Lines of Communication, where a soldier could purchase the small comforts of life and perhaps sit in a real chair for an hour or two. Naafi also provided concert parties and mobile cinemas. The concert parties, varying in size and ambition, were furnished from home by a body known as The Entertainments National Services Association; or more conveniently, "Ensa."

Some day, it is to be hoped, the story of the Ensa parties will be written in full. They gave their performances in many strange places, and stranger still were some of the adventures they encountered—none of which loses in the telling of it.

Correspondence with home, as already noted, was prodigious. As many as nine thousand bags of mail were handled on a single day by the Postal Service. A supply of free newspapers, too, was daily forthcoming, thanks to the generosity of the Newspaper Proprietors' Association. The *Continental Daily Mail* actually published a periodical supplement devoted entirely to news of special interest to the Force. Books were available in goodly quantities, and the enterprising shop-keepers of Arras and other towns soon had quantities of assorted English literature on sale. Penguins were almost as numerous as in the Antarctic Circle.

Visits from distinguished visitors made a welcome break in routine. His Majesty the King was enthusiastically received upon December 4th. The President of the French Republic, the Prime Minister, and many other prominent and familiar figures were made welcome.

So the long period of waiting and preparation drew to its close. The Force had learned much, and endured a good deal. But it had found itself. Whatever lay before it now would be faced with full efficiency and high heart. Whatever we might lack in material, the men were all right. Lord Gort sums it up:—

"The British Army contains to-day very few regimental officers and other ranks who fought in the last war. Much that was common knowledge then must therefore be learned again. Nevertheless, events on the Saar front have proved beyond doubt that the young officer and his men, once they have had experience of active service, will be in every way worthy of their predecessors."

Events were shortly to prove the entire truth and justice of his words.

CHAPTER II

TUNING UP

I

The Growth of the B.E.F.

SPRING WAS ON THE WAY, and there was a feeling of expectancy in the air. Lord Gort was entitled to look forward now to the immediate expansion of his Force to the dimensions already laid down for it. That is to say:—

“I had been informed that the expansion of the Force was to be continued by the despatch of 3rd Corps during the early months of 1940; the Armoured Division was to follow in May, and a Fourth Corps, with the 1st Canadian Division, during the late summer. Furthermore it had been decided that the Force should be divided into two Armies as soon as the number of divisions in the field, excluding the Armoured Division, rose above eleven.”

In view of this expected increase in strength, it had been arranged that the left front of the British Expeditionary Force should be extended to the north-west as far as Croix-de-Poperinghe, a few miles from Bailleul, thus relieving French troops, upon the arrival of 3rd Corps (Lt. General Sir Ronald Adam, Bt.). This Corps consisted of the 42nd Division (Major-General W. G. Holmes), the 44th (Major-General E. A. Osborne) and the 51st (Major-General V. M. Fortune). Indeed, the British took command of the new sector upon February 1st.

But the actual relief could not be effected for some time. An unexpected delay intervened, “owing to the situation elsewhere in Europe,” and the arrival of 3rd Corps was postponed. Lord Gort was also disappointed of certain shipments of ammunition and other war material upon which he had counted to make up some serious deficiencies.

However, the 51st Division arrived during early February, accompanied by the 50th (Motor) Division (Major-General G. le Q. Martel), and at the end of March the main body of 3rd Corps was finally despatched to France.

Yet another disturbing diversion was created by the German invasion of Denmark and Norway upon April 9th. Army leave was stopped, and the 15th Brigade of the 5th Division despatched to England, *en route* for Norway. The air was full, too, of rumours of an immediate invasion of

Belgium and Holland. Certain units were placed under short notice to move, and there was much diligent air-reconnaissance. But the fateful moment was not yet.

It was during this period that the 51st Division, as previously related, was despatched to the Saar front, and out of Gort's hands for good.

II

The Equipment Situation

MEANWHILE THE TRAINING of the troops and the development of further defensive positions were continued without relaxation. By the 10th May over four hundred concrete pill-boxes had been completed, with another hundred under construction. Training areas were being prepared to accommodate the Armoured Division on arrival; Corps Schools were established for the training of junior leaders. In fact everything that could be done to render the British Expeditionary Force efficient and secure seems to have been done—so far as the men on the spot could do it.

"But"—says Lord Gort—"the situation as regards equipment, though there was latterly some improvement in certain directions, caused me serious misgivings, even before men and material began to be diverted by the needs of operations elsewhere. I had on several occasions called the attention of the War Office to the shortage of almost every nature of ammunition, of which the stocks in France were not nearly large enough to permit of the rates of expenditure laid down for sustained operations before the War."

Grave words. As matters turned out, the ultimate operations lasted for too brief a period for these shortages to be felt. Our disasters arose from other causes. But it is none the less uncomfortable to speculate here as to how our resources would have stood the strain, had the Battle of Flanders been prolonged for twenty-five weeks instead of twenty-five days.

The shortages were not primarily the fault of the War Office, nor for that matter of the Ministry of Supply. They were the fruit of our national predilection for a policy of *laissez faire* and wishful thinking. But the net result was that the Army had to be asked to make the best of what it could get, until the machinery of production could provide in full for the needs of all three Services. And to that all too familiar appeal the Army was to make, as the event proved, its usual heroic response, and more.

III

Plans of Action

DURING ALL THESE MONTHS Lord Gort and his staff had been eagerly concerned to know the exact part to be played by the British Expeditionary Force in the event of an advance into Holland and Belgium.

In his Despatch Lord Gort refrains from comment upon the merits of the plans ultimately unfolded.

"The question of such an advance," he says, "was one of high policy, with a political as well as a military aspect. It was therefore not for me to comment on it: my responsibilities were confined to ensuring that the orders issued by the French for the employment of the British Expeditionary Force were capable of being carried out."

He adds, with a touch of proper pride: "Events proved that the orders issued for this operation were well within the capacity of the Force."

The plans themselves were complicated and hampered from the start by the dogged policy of neutrality *à l'outrance* adopted and maintained by the Belgian Government.

If Belgium were invaded by the enemy, it was obvious that the Allies would have to enter her territory and assist in her defence. In other words, a joint Defence Scheme was plainly indicated. Yet, says Lord Gort:—

"The French authorities were never in a position to obtain reliable and accurate details of the plans of the Belgian General Staff. . . . Such slender contact as existed between the British and Belgian Military authorities was maintained through the Military Attaché at His Majesty's Embassy at Brussels and General Van Overstraeten, Military Adviser to the King of the Belgians."

However, it was assumed that in the event of an attempted invasion of their country the Belgian Army would be found occupying the best available defensive positions along the Germano-Belgian frontier, utilising such natural protection against tank attack as that offered by the deep-set River Meuse and the Albert Canal. It was further understood that the Belgians were preparing an anti-tank obstacle running south from Wavre to Namur, and covering an area particularly vulnerable to tank-attack, known as the Gembloux Gap.

The obvious plan then was to distribute the Allied forces behind the Belgian Army, ready to go forward to their support.

IV

The Escaut and the Dyle

THREE ALTERNATIVE PLANS were devised upon by the French High Command, in which Lord Gort agreed to play his part. In order to visualise their nature it will be well to consider the map of Belgium in some detail.

Behind the positions presumably to be occupied by the Belgian Army lie three rivers, roughly parallel with one another, the Dyle, the Dendre, and the Escaut—presenting a valuable series of natural tank obstacles. The most easterly of the three is the Dyle, the most westerly the Escaut, with the Dendre in between. Owing to uncertainty as to the reliability of the Belgian defences, the first plan considered by Lord Gort and General Georges was upon what may be called Safety First lines. It consisted simply in manning the Franco-Belgian frontier defences, and pushing forward mobile troops to the line of the Escaut, while the French 7th Army on Lord Gort's left held the enemy on the line of the Messines Ridge and the Yser Canal.

This plan was soon discarded, probably as being a little too Maginot-minded, and it was next proposed to secure and hold the line of the Escaut itself, from the point at which it crosses the Belgian frontier at Maulde, northward to the neighbourhood of Ghent, where it was intended to make junction with the Belgian forces extending to the sea-coast. From the Escaut armoured cars would reconnoitre as far eastward as the second river, the Dendre, from which delaying actions could be fought back to the Escaut itself. This was known as Plan E, and offered the great advantage that the Escaut positions were within a day's march of the frontier, and could be quickly and easily occupied.

Meanwhile, however, the French authorities had been acquiring further information regarding the defences of the Belgian Army, and had formed the opinion—much too optimistic, as the event was to prove—that it would be safe to count on the Belgian defences near the Germano-Belgian frontier holding fast for a considerable time, despite the absence there of anything in the nature of a Maginot Line.

The third plan was therefore considered—namely, to advance to the most easterly of our three rivers, the Dyle, and take up a prepared position there instead of upon the Escaut.

This was known as Plan D, and was ultimately adopted. Its advantages were that it offered a shorter line of defence, together with greater depth; also, its northern end was inundated. Lastly, it represented

smaller enemy occupation of Belgian territory. On the other hand it would involve the B.E.F. in a forward move of sixty miles against time, over unreconnoitred country.

A final conference was held on 16th November at Folembray, the headquarters of the French First Group of Armies, and Plan D was confirmed. There were present, besides Lord Gort and General Georges, General Billotte, of whom we are to hear a good deal in the future, and Generals Blanchard and Corap, commanding the French 1st and 9th Armies. It was agreed that the frontage of the B.E.F. position on the Dyle was to be from Wavre to Louvain.

Plan E, however, was not entirely abandoned. Both plans were worked out in complete detail as alternatives to one another, in so far as they could be worked out at all; for it must be remembered that they could only exist so far upon paper. No actual reconnaissance, troop movement, or disposition could be made across the Belgian frontier until the Belgian Government gave the word.

It may be added here, however, that these plans, based though they were upon theory and supposition, actually worked out to schedule in all respects.

V

The Final Plan

GENERALLY SPEAKING, the proposed defence scheme against invasion from Germany now worked out as follows:—

The Allied line, beginning at Antwerp in the north, would run south via Louvain, Wavre and Namur, thus covering Brussels itself. The British sector, extending from Louvain to Wavre, would have upon its right the 1st French Army (Général d'Armée Blanchard), and upon the left the French Seventh Army (Général d'Armée Giraud). The plans of this Army included a possible advance into Holland, and this actually took place.

It was understood that the Belgian Army, if forced to withdraw from its frontier defences, would come into the line upon the left of the B.E.F.—that is to say, on a general line from Louvain northward to Antwerp.

The British front was to be occupied initially by 1st Corps, under Lt.-General M. G. H. Barker (who had recently taken over the command from General Sir John Dill, today Chief of the Imperial General Staff), on a two-division front on the right, and 2nd Corps on the left, on a front of one division. The Divisions in question were to be the 2nd, 1st and 3rd, in the order named. The 12th Royal Lancers (Armoured cars) were

to move in advance to a general line some miles beyond the Dyle, to observe approaches from the east. The move of the three Divisions was to be by motor transport, and was to be completed in 90 hours, continuing both by day and night. Other divisions were suitably disposed in positions of reserve. Detailed instructions were also issued for the preparation of defences on the three rivers, for demolitions and inundations, and the organisation of road traffic—including refugees, for whom special routes had been allotted.

VI

A Disquieting Report

ANY DOUBTS WHICH MIGHT have been entertained by Lord Gort regarding the advisability of occupying the line of the Dyle instead of any less advanced position were set at rest by some eleventh-hour news regarding the Belgian tank-obstacle.

It now transpired that this obstacle, instead of covering the dangerous Gembloux Gap, as reported, was sited much further eastward, upon the line Namur-Perwez-Louvain, and was, moreover, not by any means completed.

"On the British front," says Lord Gort, "the River Dyle was so far superior as an anti-tank obstacle to any artificial work further east which the Belgians might be preparing, that I had no hesitation in urging adherence to the existing plan for the defence of the Dyle position."

The French 1st Army were in a different case. They had no natural obstacle to defend them, and this rendered them much more dependent upon what the Belgians might or might not be constructing to the east of them.

Definite information upon the matter was urgently demanded, but it was not destined to be forthcoming in time.

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Such was the general situation in the first week in May, 1940, and such were the plans which had been formulated and worked out, so far as was possible under the conditions imposed.

The time was now fast approaching for the patiently designed machine to be put to the test. The "phony war" was drawing to an end, with the real thing close upon its heels.

CHAPTER III

BLITZKRIEG

I

The Day

THE FIRST DIRECT INTIMATION that the period of preparation and waiting was over, and that active hostilities had begun in earnest, came from enemy aircraft, which appeared over Lord Gort's headquarters at Arras at 4.30 a.m. on Friday, 10th May, and dropped bombs—not only there but upon Doullens, Abbeville, and numerous aerodromes.

An hour later a message was received from General Georges ordering instant readiness to move into Belgium. This was immediately followed by instructions to put Plan D into operation.

The weather, we are told, was set fair, and remained so, except for an occasional thunderstorm, for the next three weeks.

The B.E.F. was quickly on the move. Zero hour was fixed at 1 p.m. that day, when the 12th Royal Lancers crossed the frontier upon their dash to the Dyle, amid the cheers of the Belgian populace. Lord Gort himself moved to his command post at Wahagnies, midway between Douai and Lille.

As already stated, Plan D ran almost exactly to schedule. Enemy action increased somewhat, but did not interfere with the forward movement of the troops. Traffic problems were successfully dealt with, and the first phase of the plan, the manning of the Dyle defences, was completed by 12th May.

II

The Belgian Dispositions

BUT ALREADY THERE WAS disquieting news of the Belgian Army out in front. Belgian cyclist troops were falling back upon Huy, on the Meuse; and at Maestricht, on the frontier further north, it was reported

that they had been forestalled by enemy action from the rear, and had been unable to demolish important bridges over the Meuse and Albert Canal. British bombers were despatched to deny the crossing of these waters as far as possible, and did some most effective work.

Next came a report from the reconnoitring French cavalry regarding the Belgian anti-tank obstacles, which they had now had an opportunity to examine. As had been feared, there proved to be no effective obstacle on the Gembloux line at all. That on the Perwez line was not only unfinished, but was badly sited and situated on a forward slope.

In the circumstances General Georges decided to push out advanced troops as far as the obstacle, in order to cover the Gembloux Gap. He expressed a hope that the B.E.F. would conform. 1st and 2nd Corps accordingly reconnoitred the anti-tank obstacles reputed to exist in the Forest of Meerdael upon their left front, with a view to sending forward detachments with anti-tank guns. It was found that these obstacles had only been completed in places.

All this was unsatisfactory enough. Anxiety was heightened by the information that a German thrust, with at least two armoured divisions, was developing on the front of the French 9th Army, which lay beyond the right of the French 1st Army in the Ardennes area, opposite Luxembourg.

This was alarming news indeed, for two reasons. In the first place an attack in this sector had not been considered probable; in the second it was rumoured that the efficiency and preparedness of the French 9th Army were not quite on a par with those of the other French forces in the line.

Lord Gort immediately requested the War Office to expedite the despatch of our long-awaited 1st Armoured Division. Indeed it was sorely needed. He was destined never to receive it under his command, though it eventually came into action further south.

All during this day, Sunday, 12th May, there was great activity in the air, the Royal Air Force battling gallantly to impede the enemy advance across the Meuse and Albert Canal. The enemy, however, had established strong anti-aircraft defences at nodal points. The strain, moreover, on the fighter group of the Air Component was very severe. It was by now reduced to some fifty aircraft, and although Lord Gort had asked for four fresh squadrons from home, only one had arrived. Still, in the first three days of the invasion the R.A.F. in France destroyed one hundred and one enemy aircraft, against a loss of seventy-eight of their own.

III

Enter General Billotte

IT WAS HIGH TIME that a definite scheme of co-ordinated action should be evolved to meet the dangers which threatened us.

Accordingly, upon this same Sunday a conference was arranged at Château Casteau, near Mons. It was attended by the King of the Belgians, now in supreme command of the Belgian forces, his Military Adviser, General Van Overstraeten, Monsieur Daladier, Lt.-General H. R. Pownall, Chief of Staff of the B.E.F., representing Lord Gort, who was absent on pressing business elsewhere, and General Georges and General Billotte. We are to hear a good deal of the last-named in future, for it was upon his shoulders that the task of co-ordinating the French, British and Belgian armies in a common defence scheme was now laid, by general agreement. The B.E.F. were thus removed from the direct control of General Georges.

There were no events of major importance during the next day, but it was understood that the Belgian forces were now withdrawing to the general line Louvain-Antwerp.

Upon the following day Lord Gort paid a visit to Brussels, where he met the commanders of First and Second Corps at the British Embassy. He also visited the King of the Belgians and impressed upon him the importance of having fresh Belgian troops established early in position on the British left, to continue the line covering Brussels.

The three squadrons of fighters for the Air Component asked for upon 12th May had now arrived, but it was necessary immediately to put them at the disposal of Air Marshal Barratt commanding the Advanced Air Striking Force for use on the French front; for the ominous reports from the 9th French Army had been confirmed. The enemy, bursting through the Ardennes valleys, rendered passable through a dry and early spring, had crossed the Meuse between Sedan and Mézières.

IV

Holland Out

THE TALE OF EARLY MISFORTUNE was not yet complete, for on Wednesday, 15th May, after a heroic but hopeless resistance of less than a week, the Dutch Army laid down its arms. This event had little actual effect upon the B.E.F. in Belgium, but naturally inflicted a further severe blow upon Belgian morale.

The French 7th Army immediately withdrew its advanced forces to the neighbourhood of Antwerp, always a position of vital importance; and at the same time took steps to restore the situation in the Ardennes, several divisions of this Army being despatched south to the support of General Corap and the 9th French Army. This involved a movement across the rear and communications of the B.E.F., but owing to efficient traffic control, was accomplished without delaying our movements or the ordered development of Plan D.

The refugee problem was now becoming acute, and further complicated because, despite Lord Gort's requests, the Belgian authorities had done nothing to restrict the use of private motor-cars or the sale of petrol.

CHAPTER IV

DISASTER ON THE RIGHT

I

Back from the Dyle

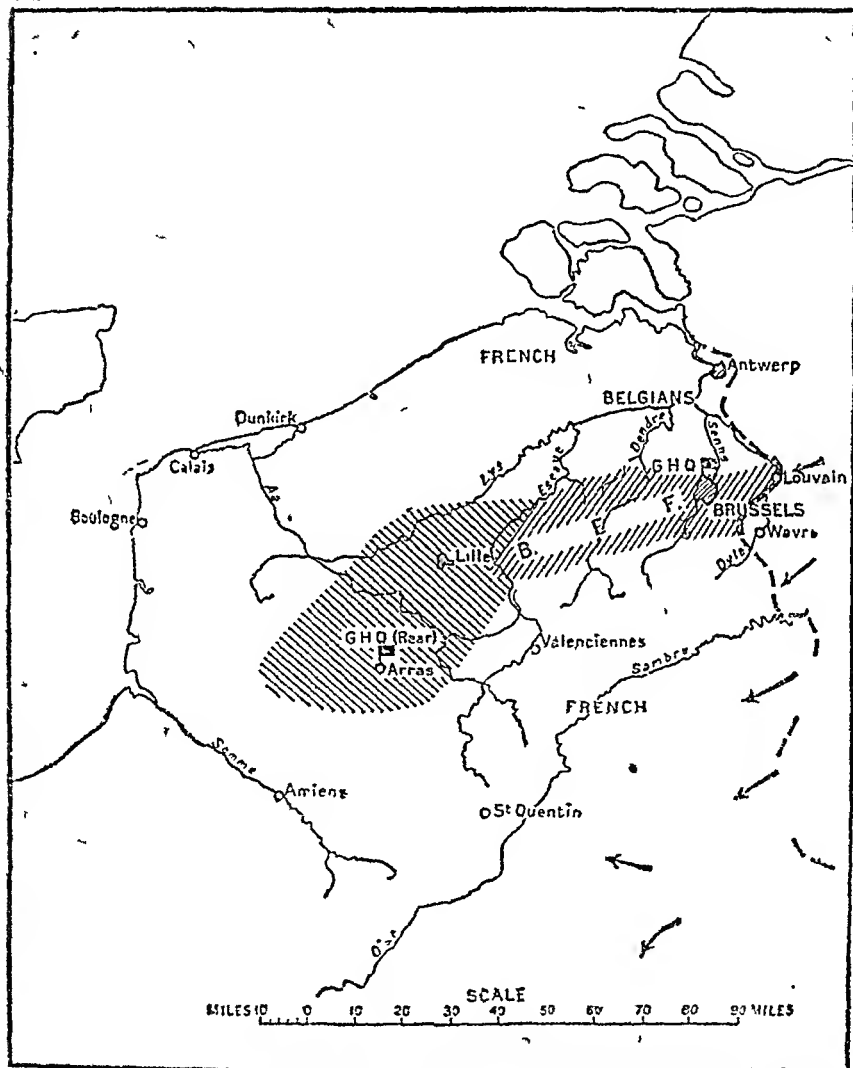
BEFORE THE END of the first week's fighting it had become obvious that Plan D could not possibly be carried out further. The situation had deteriorated too completely.

In the north, Holland was in German hands, while to the south, the French 9th Army appeared to be in danger of disintegrating altogether; which meant that Arras and our right flank were already threatened. How badly was not yet realised, though the grimmest of realisation was soon to come.

There had so far been no serious attack upon the Belgian positions upon our left, nor upon ourselves, except for a temporary penetration of our forward positions to the south-west of Louvain, which had speedily been made good. But the French 1st Army upon our immediate right were in severe trouble, and had lost ground which they were not likely to regain, despite the aid supplied by ourselves both on the ground and in the air.

SITUATION OF B. E. F. 16TH MAY, 1940.

DIAGRAM I



—— British Line.

--- Allied Line.

← German Panzer Divisions.



British Fighting Formations



British Administrative Troops

In other words, a prolonged defence on the Dyle position was now out of the question, and it was up to General Billotte, as co-ordinator of Allied movements in Belgium, to organise fresh measures—possibly a reversion to Plan E and a retirement to the line of the Escaut.

Lord Gort had already asked for instructions, especially as regards timing, for the first step in such a withdrawal was bound to be a considerable one—a stride in fact of some fifteen or twenty miles to the Senne Canals, which lay between the Dyle and the Dendre.

He received his orders, and in the sense expected—Plan E and the line of the Escaut, sixty miles back—that very night.

The withdrawal to the Senne canals was successfully completed by the afternoon of the next day, but there was a hitch over tanks which was to have unfortunate consequences. Some enemy tanks and motor-cycle units had been reported on the right flank of 1st Corps, and as a precaution, part of the 1st Army Tank Brigade, which had started to withdraw for entrainment at Brussels, was turned round to meet the thrust. This naturally occasioned delay, and when the tanks ultimately faced about again and arrived at their entraining station, the necessary railway transport was no longer available, and the remainder of the move was carried out by road. This led to mechanical trouble later.

II

Break-through

MEANWHILE, what was really happening on the right, down in France?

The situation here on the morning of the 17th had been described as "obscure", and doubtless it was; for British G.H.Q. were not being kept too well informed by the French High Command, despite the fact that Lord Gort continued to maintain continuous liaison with General Georges' headquarters.

"I received no information through this channel," he says, "of any steps it was prepared to take to close the gap which might have been effected by my own command."

But alas, there was no "obscurity" about the actual situation at all. The rumoured "gap" had become a corridor. The enemy, in strength increasing to ten armoured divisions, had broken through on a front of some twenty miles south of the Forest of Mormal, and their advance guard of swift tanks and motor-cycles was pouring westward right across France—across the Meuse, across the Oise, along the Somme, straight for Abbeville and the coast of France.

Unless the gap could be closed and the westward stream dammed, two things would happen: the Allied Forces would be cut in half, and the British Lines of Communication, which it will be remembered did not run straight back to such ports as Calais and Boulogne, but diagonally and south-westerly through Amiens, to Cherbourg, Brest, and beyond, would be traversed and broken, perhaps beyond repair.

III.

Defence of Rearward Areas

HAVING ANTICIPATED SOMEWHAT, let us return to Lord Gort's Headquarters. Here, at last, upon the night of Sunday, the 19th, Lord Gort was informed by General Billotte of the full nature of the break-through in the south, and of the steps which were being taken to deal with it, including the tasks to be undertaken by the B.E.F.

There were in the rearward areas at this time, strung out roughly south-westward upon our lines of communication, three British Divisions which have not yet been mentioned—the 12th, 23rd, and 46th, consisting of eight or nine battalions each, with divisional engineers but no artillery. Their signals and administration units were in no more than skeleton form; so were their armament and transport. In fact these divisions had merely been brought out to France to work and train, and there had been no present intention that they should undertake combatant duties, for which they were ill-equipped and only partially prepared. But every man was needed now, and right nobly did this improvised defence force rise to the nightmare emergencies of the moment.

"Troops of these three divisions," says Lord Gort, "fought and marched continuously for a fortnight, and proved, if proof were needed, that they were composed of soldiers who, despite their inexperience and lack of equipment, could hold their own with a better found and more numerous enemy."

He spoke no more than the truth, as we shall see.

The first of these divisions put to work was the 23rd, who were ordered by General Georges to occupy the line of the Canal du Nord, on a frontage of 15 miles, from Ruyalcourt (10 miles north of Peronne) to Arleux (6 miles south of Douai). They moved to their positions during 17th May, and were provided with about forty field, anti-tank, and anti-aircraft guns from ordnance reserves.

They thus faced east, with Rear G.H.Q., at Arras, behind them.

IV

Further Improvisations

BUT ARRAS WAS still inadequately protected, for just to the south lay the break in the line through which the tide of invasion was pouring. To formulate a plan for closing the gap was the business of the French High Command—presumably by means of a strong counter-attack launched both from north and south.

Meanwhile Lord Gort took immediate action to protect his own rear G.H.Q. The Commander, Lines of Communication Area, was ordered to collect every available man, and to despatch the 12th and 46th Divisions to the forward zone. The position of the 23rd Division at Ruyalcourt was strengthened by the despatch of a brigade of the 12th Division, with four field guns, to cover the north-western exits from Peronne, further south; while engineer parties prepared for the demolition of crossings over the Canal du Nord between the Somme and Ruyalcourt.

Further back towards the Somme various local defence units were extemporised. Few of these, or their commanders, had any previous experience of fighting, but their determination was beyond all praise. A mobile bath unit played a stout part in the defence of St. Pol, twenty miles to the west of Arras; while General Construction Companies of the Royal Engineers and units of the Royal Army Service Corps placed their own localities in a state of defence and manned them until they were "overwhelmed, relieved, or ordered to withdraw."

The defence of Arras itself was entrusted to the O.C. 1st Battalion Welsh Guards, who had under him some units of the Royal Engineers, an Overseas Defence battalion (the 9th West Yorks), and an improvised tank squadron.

One further improvisation should be mentioned here—the assembly of a mixed force under Major-General F. N. Mason-MacFarlane, Lord Gort's Director of Military Intelligence. This force was known as Macforce, and its task was to guard against a more immediate threat to the right flank of the B.E.F. itself (now engaged in withdrawing to the line of the Escaut), by covering the crossings upon the River Scarpe, from Rache, a few miles north-east of Douai, to St. Amand.

But these could be but makeshifts until or unless the gap was closed, and the continuity of the Allied line restored.

CHAPTER V

THE THREAT TO THE BRITISH
FLANK

I

Back to the Escaut

LET US NOW RETURN to the main body of the B.E.F., which it will be remembered, had completed the first stage of its withdrawal from the Dyle by reaching the Senne Canals on 17th May. The next step plainly was to get back to the Escaut itself, and that speedily; for the situation on the right flank was too hazardous to permit of a moment's delay. Lord Gort found himself in a momentary dilemma here, for while General Billotte had ordered a withdrawal that night, another order, from General Georges, seemed to contemplate a wait of a further twenty-four hours. Eventually, at Lord Gort's urgent representation, General Billotte's original order was adhered to, and arrangements for withdrawal to the Escaut were put in hand at once. The new line was to be held by six divisions, two from each Corps of the B.E.F., extending from a bridge over the Escaut at Bleharies to Audenarde inclusive.

At the same time the Belgian Army upon our left (after a short delay due to the late arrival of orders) began a conforming movement to the rear. In the first stage they duly effected a junction with the B.E.F. on the Dendre at Alost, without undue pressing by the enemy.

On our right, the line of the French 1st Army now ran through Mons and Maubeuge, and was subject to fierce attention by enemy tanks.

Enemy bombing too was soon intensified along the British front, and our fighters were kept busy during the hours of daylight.

However, by Sunday morning, 19th May, the withdrawal to the Escaut was successfully and punctually completed. But here a disappointment waited. The Escaut at normal level would have offered a formidable tank obstacle. But this level was found to be dangerously low—in places less than three feet deep. Sluices had been closed, it seemed, by the

French in the Valeneiennes area, to produce inundations—at the expense of the water defences on the front of the B.E.F. Co-ordination had gone wrong somewhere.

There for a moment we must leave our main body, to study further developments upon the threatened right flank of the Allied forces.

II

Penetration Completed

HERE THE SITUATION was steadily worsening. The enemy had during 18th May definitely penetrated as far as Amiens. Our communications over the Somme with Abbeville were still holding next day, and the town itself was placed in a state of defence; but there seemed little doubt that the armoured fighting vehicles of the enemy, reckoned in this area at five divisions, would shortly penetrate to the coast itself and so complete the traversing of our Lines of Communication, and the cutting-off from the B.E.F. of the great bulk of its reserves, whether for the purpose of maintenance or replacement.

In anticipation of this, however, several days' supplies had been for some time accumulated and maintained north of the Somme. This was just as well, for two days later the enemy had not only reached Abbeville, but was pushing a column forward to Boulogne.

In other words, our position was turned. Failing the restoration of the original line, or something like it, our only hope now was to bend our right wing back and back until it faced south instead of east, and so establish, as it were, a defensive wall along the north side of the corridor, with what resources we could muster.

To sum up the situation at the moment, what may be called the B.E.F. proper was, as we know, extended along the line of the Escaut, facing roughly east. The line was continued south by Macfrees, covering the Scarpe crossings. Further south still, and facing east, lay our 23rd Division, which it will be remembered had been ordered by General Georges himself to hold part of the line of the Canal du Nord. How much of that line was really being held was not quite clear, owing to the fact that a further order had been issued from French Headquarters, allotting to the 23rd Division the sector Peronne-Ruyalecourt instead of the sector Ruyalecourt-Arleux, which the French apparently proposed to take over themselves, though they did not immediately do so.

The only evident and indisputable fact was that from Peronne southwards there was no Allied line at all.

To protect our right flank, thus exposed, yet another emergency force was swiftly and efficiently improvised, under Major-General R. L. Petre, commanding the 12th Division. He was given charge of the troops holding the Catal du Nord and the garrison of Arras. This was called Petreforce. Meanwhile all troops not required for defence (including rear G.H.Q., at Arras) were moved back in two echelons to Hazebrouck and Boulogne in accordance with a plan previously prepared. Lord Gort resumed his former headquarters at Wahagnies.

III

The Royal Air Force Affected

PERHAPS THE MOST SERIOUS effect of the German penetration was that it rendered our aerodromes in France untenable.

The Advanced Air Striking Force, which had been quartered in the neighbourhood of Rheims ever since the previous autumn, now moved to Central France, whence it could still operate; while the Air Component transferred one of their main operational aerodromes from Poix to Abbeville. Under overwhelming enemy pressure even this was abandoned upon 19th May. Thereafter all arrangements for air co-operation with the B.E.F. had to be conducted from England, though an advanced landing ground was maintained at Merville for three days longer.

Even under these trying and difficult circumstances organization and cohesion were still maintained. The air liaison work was carried out in England itself, and the targets were selected and visited in accordance with requests from the B.E.F.—telephoned or telegraphed home so long as communication remained open.

IV

A Council of War

AT MIDNIGHT on 19th May, with the general situation as described above, General Billotte paid a visit to Lord Gort at his headquarters, and gave him an account of the measures which he proposed to take to restore the situation upon the front of the French 9th Army, though it was obvious that he had little faith in his own prescription.

Lord Gort himself cherished few illusions upon the subject, especially since from the reports received from his own liaison officers, he was extremely doubtful as to whether the French had enough reserves at their disposal south of the gap to furnish a counter-attack northwards sufficiently powerful to close the gap and restore the line.

· However, all possibilities were considered. Three alternative courses were open to General Billotte and the French, Belgian and British forces under his command.

The first and obvious—and, it may be added, only effective—course was to bridge the gap by vigorous counter-attacks, delivered simultaneously from north and south of it. If this could be done, it would be possible in theory to maintain the present line of the Escaut, or at any rate the frontier defences, and continue it southward on one or other of the canal lines. But this was to prove a counsel of perfection.

The second alternative was that the forces under General Billotte should swing back from the line of the Escaut to the line of the Somme, abandoning Belgium altogether; then turn about and, having linked up with the French Armies south of the gap, establish a new line of defence facing roughly north-east.

The advantage of this plan lay in the fact that it would greatly shorten the B.E.F. lines of communication, based as they were upon French ports far to the south and south-west. On the other hand, it would mean either leaving the Belgian Army to shift for itself, or else to accompany the B.E.F., to the total abandonment of the soil of Belgium.

However, with the enemy by this time already in Amiens, such a move would appear to have been checkmated from the start, and there is no evidence that it was ever seriously contemplated by the French authorities.

Failing Alternative Number One, then, there remained only Alternative Number Three—the counsel of desperation.

This was to fight a rearguard action towards the Channel ports, making use of successive river and canal lines, and there establish a "defensive perimeter," or final barrier, to cover the evacuation of the B.E.F. to England, accompanied perhaps by French and Belgian troops.

It was an agonising prospect, but the possibility of it at least had to be considered; for there was no blinking the fact now that if the situation deteriorated much further and the mortal wound in the Allied line was left open, surrender or annihilation might be the only other alternatives. Here is Lord Gort's own dispassionate appreciation of the situation on that fateful night. One can imagine with what feelings it must have been reached:—

"I realised that this course was in theory a last alternative, and it would involve the departure of the B.E.F. from the theatre of war at a time when the French might need all the support which Britain could give them. It involved the virtual certainty that even if the excellent port facilities at Dunkirk continued to be available, it would be

necessary to abandon all the heavier guns and much of the vehicles and equipment. Nevertheless, I felt that in the circumstances there might be no other course open to me."

But only "might." The battle was not yet lost by any means, and ten days of heroic if unavailing effort still lay ahead of the B.E.F. and their tenacious leader.

CHAPTER VI

HITTING BACK

I

The Defensive Flank

THE FRENCH 1ST ARMY, on our right, had been falling back in the direction of Douai and Cambrai—towards the positions, in fact, occupied by Macforce on the Scarpe and Petreforce along the Canal du Nord.

On the night of the 19th May this Army, which was in a state of considerable disorganisation after its hard fighting, took up positions on the line of the Escaut, upon the right of our own 1st Corps, as far south as Bouchain, some ten miles south-east of Douai. But there, instead of continuing south to Cambrai (which according to Lord Gort's information was not held in strength by the enemy) the line was bent suddenly westward along the river Sensée.

This was certainly not going to help to close the gap, and it became obvious to Lord Gort that he must take further and immediate steps to establish his defensive flank to the south of the B.E.F. This was promptly done. The 50th Division were sent to take up positions along the line of the canal running north-west from Douai to La Bassée—that is, on the right of Macforce. This placed the Division in a suitable position for the counter-attack to the south which it was hoped shortly to deliver.

Meanwhile the 23rd Division, who had been holding on stoutly to the Canal du Nord against heavy odds, were withdrawn, not without loss, to a line on the Scarpe east of Arras.

Thus, by the evening of 19th May, the defensive flank was beginning to materialise, extending as it now did as far as La Bassée. The situation was slightly easier.

But the Germans were in Amiens. The kaleidoscope had taken a further and definite twist, and a new and ominous pattern was beginning to emerge. It was no longer that of a line temporarily broken, but of a besieged fortress.

"To raise such a siege," says Lord Gort, "a relieving force must be sent from the south, and to meet this force a sortie of the defenders was indicated."

II

A Visit from the C.I.G.S.

That attempt was now about to be made, and not before it was time; for the breach south of Arras had deepened and widened. The enemy armoured forces appeared to be directed upon two main objectives: one down the valley of the Somme on Abbeville, and the other toward Hesdin and Montreuil, on a course obviously set for the Channel ports. Arras was now hard pressed, though the Welsh Guards were still holding on most gallantly.

Before Lord Gort could proceed further with his plans for a counter-attack, he received a visit, early on the morning of 20th May, from the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, Sir Edmund Ironside, bearing with him Cabinet instructions to the effect that the B.E.F. was "to move southward upon Amiens, attacking all enemy forces encountered, and to take station upon the left of the French Army."

This practically amounted to an amplification of the second of the three alternative plans discussed by Lord Gort and General Billotte thirty-six hours previously—a plan discarded as impracticable then and infinitely more difficult of execution now. It was obvious that the Cabinet instructions were based upon incomplete, or rather, obsolete information regarding the present situation—which was not altogether surprising, considering the breathless speed with which events were moving.

Lord Gort did not hesitate, therefore, to point out to the C.I.G.S. the almost impossible nature of the operation proposed. He would have in the first place to disengage seven divisions from the fierce embrace of the enemy along the Escaut; he would have not only to fight a rearguard action all the way to the Somme, but at the same time attack into an area, including Amiens and the line of the Somme itself, already strongly occupied by the enemy; and this with both his flanks most inadequately guarded, if indeed they would be guarded at all. Secondly, the administrative situation made it impossible to maintain offensive operations upon

the necessary scale for any length of time. His communications were threatened, if not already cut, and it was more than likely that if he exhausted his present supply of weapons and ammunition, he would be unable to replenish them. Thirdly, he was more than doubtful, if he attempted such a movement, whether either the French 1st Army or the Belgians would be in a position to conform.

Nevertheless, he added, he was prepared and determined to launch an attack of some kind in a southerly direction. Indeed he had already arranged to do so to the south of Arras, with the 5th and 50th Divisions, his only available reserves, the following morning.

General Ironside at once recognised the force of Lord Gort's contentions, and agreed with the action which he proposed to take. The C.I.G.S. then proceeded, accompanied by General Pownall, to Lens, where he met Generals Billotte and Blanchard. Here he explained the coming operation by the 5th and 50th Divisions; with which General Billotte fully agreed, and promised to co-operate with two divisions.

Before returning to England General Ironside, in order to emphasize the seriousness of the situation and the need for vigorous action, sent a telegram to General Georges, saying that in his opinion the Allied Army Group under General Billotte—that is, the French 1st Army, the Belgian Army, and the B.E.F.—would inevitably and finally be outflanked and surrounded unless the 1st French Army made an immediate move southward on Cambrai; or unless General Georges himself launched a counter-attack northward from Peronne.

III

Counter Attack to the South

LORD GORT immediately embarked upon his preparations for the coming attack or his share therein. The 5th Division was ordered to join the 50th in the Vimy area, and its commander, Major-General Franklyn, was placed in command of all the British troops operating in and around Arras. Frankforce, as it was to be called, consisted besides the 5th and 50th Divisions (each of two brigades only) of the 1st Army Tank Brigade, already reduced in strength, together with the somewhat scattered and dog-weary Petreforce and the force under the O.C. 12th Royal Lancers.

Next day, 21st May, General Franklyn attacked. His immediate object was to secure the line of the rivers Scarpe and Cojeul: he then proposed to exploit success by advancing next day to the Sensée, and thence towards

Bapaume and Cambrai. He had the full and willing support of General Prioux, commanding the French Cavalry Corps of light tanks, not more than one out of four of which, however, was now fit for action. Still, even in their reduced strength, these afforded some protection to either flank of Frankforce.

There, however, French support ended. It will be remembered that General Billotte had undertaken to co-operate in General Franklyn's attack with two divisions of the French 1st Army, and a conference had even been arranged for the evening of 21st May at General Franklyn's headquarters, to arrange final details. But no representative of the French forces put in an appearance.

Later, it is true, General Franklyn received a letter from General Billotte to say that the two divisions might be able to move the following night. But the time factor was vital, and Franklyn attacked with such forces as he had available—the 1st Army Tank Brigade, the 151st Infantry Brigade of the 50th Division, and 13th Brigade of the 5th Division, all under General Martel. The French 1st Light Mechanised Division co-operated, as promised.

Enemy opposition proved stronger than was expected. Nevertheless the tired but indomitable British troops were not to be denied, and reached their objectives for the day. They inflicted casualties, took some prisoners and put heavy tanks to flight—a most significant feat. That however was the limit of their achievement. It was bound to be, without the support of the French upon the left. Moreover our own tanks, which had been on the road continuously since leaving Brussels (for reasons already explained) were inevitably developing mechanical trouble.

IV

The End of Arras

ALL GENERAL FRANKLYN could do now was to hold his ground for as long as possible. He extended his line further westward, but to no purpose: the enemy continued to outflank him. There was increasing pressure upon his right, and enemy troops were reported working round to the southern outskirts of Bethune and the road from Lens to Carvin. If Frankforce was not to be hemmed in, it must be withdrawn.

So Lord Gort issued the necessary orders, and the gallant 5th and 50th Divisions, having delivered their lone offensive and inflicted heavy losses upon the enemy, withdrew to the area round Seclin (south of Lille) where they would be most favourably placed to take part in any further counter-attack that might be staged.

So ended the defence of Arras, whose small garrison had provided an invaluable delaying action and rendered possible the fresh dispositions which had now to be made. From information received long afterwards it is clear that the retention of Arras must have seriously delayed the German advance, for Arras was a nodal point of communications essential for the advance of their northernmost armoured divisions.

CHAPTER VII

THE ENEMY REACH THE CHANNEL

I

The Canal Line

IT HAD NOW BECOME urgently necessary to organise a continuous series of defences for what was developing into the south-western front of the B.E.F. along the canal line extending from the Escaut to La Bassée, and thence to St. Omer and the sea.

By the 22nd May the whole of this line, some eighty-five miles long, from the sea at Gravelines to Millonfosse (west of St. Amand) was divided into sectors, for each of which a British commander was responsible.

Yet another "force" was improvised—Polforce, this time—(originally organised to defend St. Pol) under Major-General Curtis, commanding the 46th Division. To this force was allotted the protection of the canal-line between Aire and Carvin. Brigadier C. M. Usher, Commander of one of the lines of communication Sub-Areas, was placed in charge of the right bank of the river Aa, from St. Omer to Gravelines. (Enemy detachments had already reached the left bank.) He had under him the 6th Green Howards of the 23rd Division and five batteries of heavy artillery used as infantry, in conjunction with certain French troops of the Secteur Fortifié des Flandres.

The total strength of the troops on the Canal line did not at this time exceed 10,000 men. Stops were constructed, demolitions prepared, but our supply of anti-tank weapons was woefully inadequate. There were hardly enough to cover all the crossing-places.

II

Withdrawal in Belgium

LET US NOW RETURN to our eastern front, and what may be called the B.E.F. proper.

Here, upon the afternoon of 21st May, Lord Gort met his three Corps Commanders. These reported continuous fighting against very strong and growing forces, and stated that in their unanimous opinion it would be impossible to occupy the present line for more than another twenty-four hours.

It was therefore decided provisionally to swing back to the defences constructed by the B.E.F. along the Belgian frontier during the previous winter, employing Maulde as the pivot.

But first Lord Gort had to consult the French and the Belgians: the latter in particular would be seriously affected by the move. He accordingly proceeded to Ypres, where he met the King of the Belgians and General Billotte.

It was here agreed that the Escaut should be abandoned, and that the Allied Armies should occupy a line from Maulde northward to Halluin, thence along the Lys to Courtrai and Ghent. A glance at the map will show that this disposition would leave the Belgian left flank in a dangerously advanced position: and the King of the Belgians was asked, if he were forced to withdraw, if he would fall back upon the line of the Yser. He agreed, with evident reluctance.

General Gamelin had now finally disappeared from the scene, and General Weygand has assumed command of the Allied Forces. He had visited General Billotte the previous day, and had indicated that the long-promised counter-attack from the south was being planned for the following day, 22nd May. Vain hope.

III

Communications Finally Severed

SO MUCH, THEN, for the immediate dispositions and exertions of our beleaguered garrison. Let us next consider for a moment the position of the forces left outside.

These consisted of the Lines of Communication Troops, extending south-westward to the base posts, under Major-General P. de Fonblanque: the 51st Division, now returning from the Saar, and the Armoured

Division, which had at last arrived in France. There were in addition some nine battalions of the 12th and 46th Divisions, and troops of the Pioneer Corps.

By 21st May enemy penetration into the rearward areas had increased to such an extent that communication across the Somme was finally severed. On 23rd May, therefore, the War Office appointed General Sir Henry Karslake to command the defences of the Lines of Communication: in other words, the whole of the above-mentioned force, with whose fortunes we are in consequence not further concerned in this narrative, as they are now permanently removed from Lord Gort's control.

The loss of the long-awaited Armoured Division was a sore disappointment to Lord Gort, and he continued to urge the War Office to use their best endeavours to enable the Division to break through to his aid. But the barrier, as matters turned out, proved impenetrable.

IV

Boulogne and Calais Isolated

UPON THE SAME DAY as the conference at Ypres, 21st May, news was received that an enemy column of all arms was approaching Boulogne from the direction of Abbeville.

This was a shock indeed, for it brought the enemy to a district of France which has always been regarded by the British nation as a haven of peace. More serious still, it gave him continuous land observation right across the Channel to the cliffs of Dover.

The rear elements of G.H.Q., including the Adjutant-General's branch and the War Correspondents, had arrived in Boulogne on 18th May, but had been moved to Wimereux the next day, as the result of bombing.

The defence of Boulogne and Calais, each an isolated episode in the battle, was of great service in delaying the German advance up the coast towards Dunkirk, and in enabling non-essential troops to be evacuated in good order.

At Boulogne all possible steps had been taken to put the town into a state of defence with the troops available, consisting of labour units and the personnel of rest-camps. The hospitals at Etaples were evacuated

the bridges over the Canche demolished. When the danger became acute the War Office despatched from home a contingent of the Royal Marines, followed by the 20th Guards Brigade. These put up a most strenuous and valuable defence until ordered to evacuate the port, which they did upon 25th May, being taken off by a destroyer under heavy fire. One company of the Welsh Guards, heavily engaged at some distance from the harbour, did not receive the order to withdraw, and was left behind in the darkness. Hampered by the presence of unarmed civilians and refugees, they fought until overwhelmed.

At Calais a similar gallant stand was made, this time by the King's Royal Rifle Corps, the Rifle Brigade, Queen Victoria's Rifles, and the 3rd Battalion Royal Tank Regiment, who were sent across from Dover by order of the War Office. Calais was soon completely isolated, but a dogged defence was maintained until 27th May, by which time the Dunkirk Perimeter had been organised and manned.

CHAPTER VIII

THE WEYGAND PLAN

I

The Kaleidoscope Accelerates

IT IS ALMOST IMPOSSIBLE from this point, and for some days on, to give a continuous and coherent narrative of events. We were by this time fighting both on the eastern, or Belgian front, and upon the southern, or canal front, while various detachments defended isolated posts throughout the Pas de Calais and towards the Somme. In addition Lord Gort was still making desperate and loyal attempts, as we shall see, to co-operate in a counter-attack, or sortie, from north to south. Various troop movements were also on foot, by which certain British units, present in the line, were to be replaced by French and Belgian troops, and so set free either for the consolidation of the Canal line or for offensive operations to the south.

It is therefore impossible to study the pattern as a whole: it never remains the same now for more than a few hours, or minutes. The kaleidoscope is no longer merely twisting and turning: it is whirling and racing.

II

Lack of Liaison

LORD GORT'S DIFFICULTIES were increased to a grievous extent by the fact that only once during the weeks that the Battle of Flanders raged—when the withdrawal from the line of the Dyle began—did he secure written orders from the French First Group of Armies, under whose nominal co-ordination his Force was serving. His co-operation with his immediate superior, General Billotte, was of the most friendly and cordial character, but their agreement, though complete, never got past the verbal stage. General Billotte, moreover, was fatally injured in a motor accident on the night of 21st May. He was succeeded in his functions as co-ordinator by General Blanchard, commanding the French 7th Army; but this was never officially confirmed.

Lord Gort suffered a further disadvantage in receiving from home orders to initiate and carry out operations which, owing to the speed with which events were moving, had become impracticable almost before the orders were issued. General Ironside's visit to that end has already been described.

Now came Cabinet action, in the form of a very strong telegram from the Prime Minister to M. Reynaud, the new French Premier, demanding that French Commanders both in the north and south areas—which by this time were completely cut off from one another—together with Belgian G.Q.G., should be given the most stringent orders to execute "Weygand's Plan, which alone could turn defeat into victory."

The Weygand plan was for a counter-offensive on a very large scale. The part allotted to the B.E.F. was to join with the French 1st Army on its left in attacking to the south-west, with the Belgian Cavalry Corps on its right.

That was the general idea, but of details there were none. As already noted, Lord Gort did not receive any written orders from the French; he had no information from any source as to the exact location either of allied or enemy forces on the far side of the gap; his own troops were heavily engaged on his eastern and southern fronts, and his lines of communication were threatened, if not cut. Nor could he feel very optimistic about the extent of the support which might be expected from the French 1st Army. Moreover, the Belgian cavalry, even if available, would have had to travel forty miles across country to get into position. The French mechanized divisions and his own armoured units had already suffered severe losses, which had definitely reduced their strength. In

addition, his available ammunition at the moment only amounted to some 300 rounds per gun.

Finally, the Weygand plan was apparently based upon the belief, quite erroneous, that the French 7th Army had recaptured Peronne, Albert, and Amiens—the line of the Somme, in fact. In other words, the plan had no substance at all. Nothing had been verified, nothing worked out, nothing co-ordinated. Never was a British General called upon to participate in a more nebulous or unpromising operation.

However, Lord Gort saw General Blanchard, and proposed that to implement their part in the Weygand plan, Blanchard's Army Group should stage an attack southwards, with two British divisions and one French division under Sir Ronald Adam, and the French Cavalry Corps. At the same time Lord Gort reiterated, both to General Blanchard and our own Secretary of State, the self-evident proposition that the main effort must come from south of the gap, and that the northern forces, beleaguered and hammered as they were upon every side, could effect little more than a sortie.

Owing to the necessity of finding time to effect the essential troop movements and reliefs, Lord Gort stated that he could not be ready until 26th May. It was then 23rd May.

There is no need to enlarge further upon this particular operation, as it was destined never to take place. Once more events had moved too quickly.

III

Administration Problems

BEFORE RETURNING to the beleaguered garrison of the irregular salient which was beginning to form round Dunkirk and Ostende, it may be interesting and illuminating to consider some of Lord Gort's more pressing administrative (as opposed to operative) problems during this trying period, and the steps which were taken to deal with them.

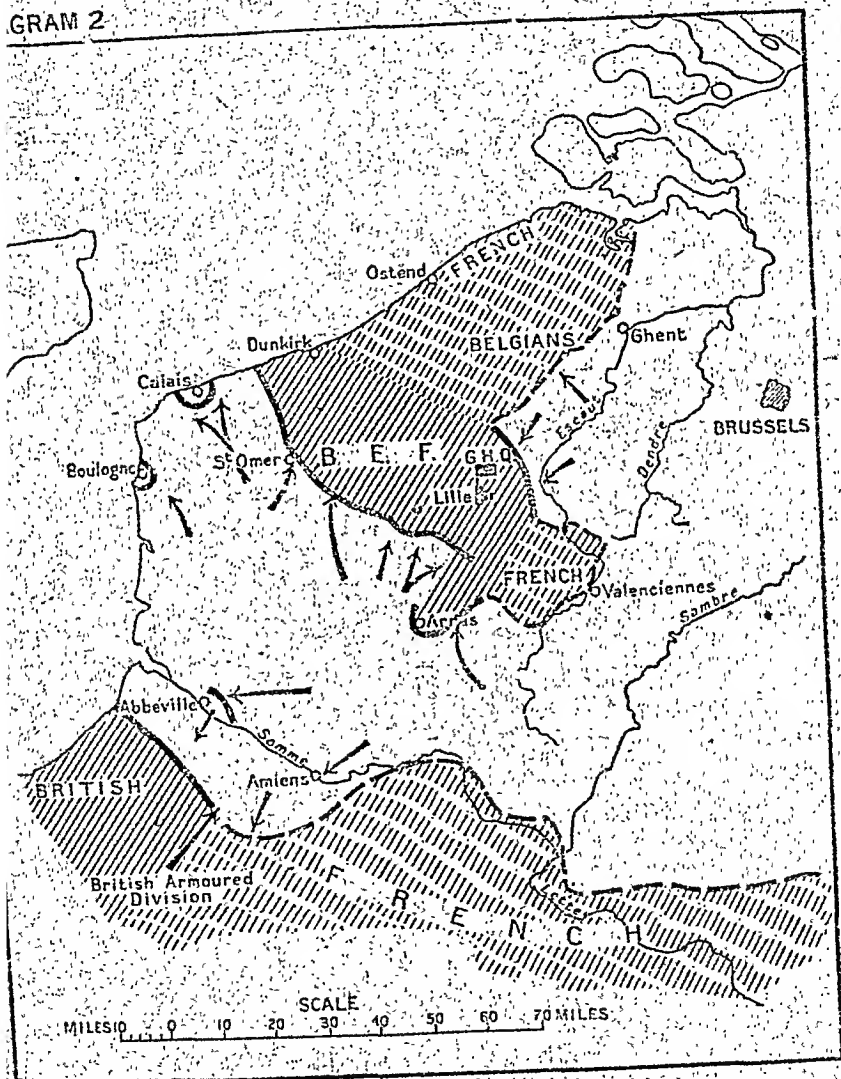
First, the question of supply. An Army in these days marches not only upon its stomach, but upon its carburettor, so to say, as well. Without petrol it would be as helpless as without food or ammunition.

For the first week after the invasion our administrative arrangements, which formed a part of Plan D, had worked normally. Then came the breakthrough the French 9th Army, and the Quartermaster-General, who maintained close touch with Lord Gort throughout, deemed it advisable to discontinue the use of the railway through Amiens and Arras, and to switch all traffic via Eu and Abbeville to Bethune. He also ordered forward every available trainload of ammunition to the Hazebrouck area.

THE WEYGAND PLAN
SITUATION OF B.E.F.
23RD MAY 1940.

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GRAM 2



— British Line



British Troops.

- - - Allied Line



Allied Troops.

→ German Panzer Divisions

The situation continued to deteriorate, and already the spectre of broken lines of communication, and the consequences thereof, was raising its head. New bases must be organised in anticipation.

Straightway shipments of supplies and stores were despatched from home direct to Boulogne, Calais and Dunkirk. And none too soon, for the railway at Abbeville was cut on 21st May, leaving a quarter of a million men separated from their proper bases and in need of some 2,000 tons per day of ammunition, supplies and petrol.

Petrol dumps, so far, were sufficiently abundant, but the food situation was serious. Difficulties here had been complicated by the establishment of so many independent, improvised forces, without regular organisation for subsistence. Deficiencies were met to a certain extent by commandeering Naafi supplies in Lille and through negotiation with civilian firms.

By 22nd May the situation had grown more threatening still, for the ports of Calais and Boulogne were definitely out of action and the greater part of the Railhead Mechanical Transport had been captured. Effort, however, was never relaxed, and a certain amount of rations and small arms ammunition continued to arrive by air for a little longer; but after 23rd May it became impossible for aircraft to land.

Dunkirk was now established as a Base. Its water supply had been destroyed, but its wharfage arrangements continued workable till 26th May though perpetual air-raids imposed a heavy strain on the dogged stevedore battalions. Ultimately cranes and quays were put out of action, and supplies could only be landed from lighters, on the beaches. Yet in spite of all, deliveries were continued to the troops, somehow, until 30th May.

Improvised arrangements, too, were made for the evacuation of casualties. In the restricted space now at the disposal of the B.E.F., Casualty Clearing Stations had to be turned into hospitals. Hospital ships continued to berth at Dunkirk till the very end of things, and casualties were evacuated to them both by road and rail. Ambulance trains were running as late as 26th May. But this is to anticipate.

IV

A Drastic Step

ON 23RD MAY LORD GORT was compelled to place the B.E.F. on half-rations. When we consider the added strain that such unavoidable privation must have imposed upon men with more than a week of continuous and desperate fighting still lying ahead of them, our admiration for the courage and endurance of the B.E.F. must be further increased.

CHAPTER IX

BACKS TO THE WALL

I

A Shrinking Perimeter

THE GENERAL DISPOSITIONS of the B.E.F. and allied forces were now beginning to contract upon themselves into a definable area, more easy to visualise than formerly, for the sufficient and regrettable reason that it was rapidly growing smaller.

Having already written off from this record the Armoured Division, which, together with the 51st Division and Units of the 12th and other divisions, was now irrevocably separated from the B.E.F. by the gap between north and south, we may confine ourselves to the terrain occupied by the troops under Lord Gort's immediate command.

This area on Friday, 24th May, after a fortnight's desperate fighting, formed a rough triangle with sides about fifty miles in length. The base consisted of the French and Belgian coast from Gravelines to Zeebrugge; the apex was situated in the neighbourhood of Douai. From Douai to Gravelines ran the Canal line, or southern face of the triangle, through Bethune and Aire to St. Omer, and thence along the river Aa to Gravelines and the sea. (This last sector had now been taken over by the French.)

Dunkirk itself was controlled, in accordance with French practice, by the Admiral du Nord, Admiral Abrial. Under his authority the command of military forces in this area was assumed on 24th May by General de Corps d'Armée Fagalde. This Corps had been fighting hitherto on the left of the Belgians.

The third side of the triangle, that facing east, consisted roughly of the original Allied front, as arranged for under Plan E—the Escaut line. This sector was held by four British divisions, the 42nd, 1st, 3rd, and 4th, following the frontier line as far as Halluin; where the Belgian line took over and extended north-eastward in the direction of Ghent.

II

The Pincers at Work

SUCH WAS THE GEOGRAPHICAL SITUATION, approximately, on 24th May. But a further contraction of the triangle was immediately due.

On 25th May heavy attacks were experienced both on the Canal line and the Belgian front. The usual pincer tactics were being employed in earnest now, the object being to pinch out our last available seaport, Dunkirk. So far the chief pressure had been experienced upon the south front, but now the Belgian front on the Lys was attacked in full force. If this broke, the British left would be seriously compromised. There was no real rallying point between the Lys and the Yser, and the route Estaire-Hazebrouck-Dunkirk, Lord Gort's present main line of communication with the coast, would thus be rendered impassable.

Lord Gort therefore took immediate steps to extend the British line northward towards Ypres, from Halluin, along the old Ypres-Comines Canal.

But plainly the situation was critical, for the breaking of the Belgian line under present pressure could only be a matter of time—probably of hours—and the British line itself was already strung out to the extreme of attenuation.

Sir John Dill, now Chief of the Imperial General Staff, arrived on the morning of the 25th in response to an invitation from Lord Gort, and was quick to realise the full implications of the situation. He agreed that the counter-attack to the southward fixed for the next day (the preparations for which have already been described) would now serve no purpose, and it was later cancelled. He also telegraphed to the Secretary of State, informing him of the extreme gravity of the situation.

Meanwhile the Belgians, as had been feared, were fast falling back under heavy enemy pressure on the ground and in the air. In other words, the eastern wall of the triangle was caving in.

III

Back to the Lys

NEXT MORNING, the 26th, after a short discussion between Lord Gort and General Blanchard, it was decided that there was nothing for it but to withdraw behind the Lys, and a joint plan was immediately formulated. It was back to the wall at last; there could be no further sorties.

The lay-out of the B.E.F. was beginning to take final shape in the Allied dispositions. The area now occupied stretched across the Pas de Calais like a great cone-shaped bag, with its apex at Douai and its mouth opening on to the sea between Dunkirk and Nieuport. The apex was occupied by the French 1st Army: the sides were manned, for the most part, by British troops. Next the sea lay French troops on the western flank, and French and Belgian on the eastern.

But the bag was still too large for its contents: the perimeter to be defended, some 128 miles, was too long for the troops now available. A withdrawal still nearer to the coast was indicated.

A scheme which would reduce the perimeter by some 58 miles was drawn up and agreed. The movement was calculated to finish in three days' time, upon 29th May.

The difficulties of execution were great, for the corridor of withdrawal was growing narrower as the sides of the bag continued to contract—especially the south side, where the canal line had been forced at various points—and troops were beginning inevitably to get into one another's way. The roads were few and narrow, and the French troops added to the difficulties of the situation by bringing into the area (despite a definite and official veto) considerable quantities of horse-transport. Pitiful crowds of refugees added to the congestion and tragedy of the scene.

IV

The Final Decision

ON THE MORNING of 26th May an interchange of telegrams took place between Lord Gort and the Secretary of State for War which put a definite period to the Battle of Flanders. Here is the text of the fateful exchanges. The first is from the Secretary of State.

"... I have had information all of which goes to show that French offensive from Somme cannot be made in sufficient strength to hold any prospect of functioning with your Allies in the North. Should this prove to be the case you will be faced with a situation in which the safety of the B.E.F. will predominate. In such conditions only course open to you may be to fight your way back to west, where all beaches and ports east of Gravelines will be used for embarkation. Navy will provide fleet of ships and small boats, and R.A.F. would give full support. As withdrawal may have to begin very early, preliminary plans should be urgently prepared.

" Prime Minister is seeing M. Reynaud to-morrow afternoon, when whole situation will be clarified including attitude of French to the possible move"

To this Lord Gort replied that a withdrawal westward had been arranged between the French and himself that morning. He stated that the Belgian news was disquieting, and added these grave words :—

" I must not conceal from you that a great part of the B.E.F. and its equipment will inevitably be lost even in best circumstances."

Later in the day came a further telegram from the War Office :—

" Prime Minister had conversation M. Reynaud this afternoon. Latter fully explained to him the situation and resources French Army. It is clear that it will not be possible for French to deliver attack from the south in sufficient strength to enable them to effect junction with Northern Armies. In these circumstances no course open to you but to fall back upon coast M. Reynaud communicating General Weygand, and latter will no doubt issue orders in this sense forthwith. You are now authorised to operate towards coast forthwith in conjunction with French and Belgian Armies."

So the Weygand plan had been abandoned at last, and the B.E.F. was bidden to make its own arrangements for a final stand—in other words for surrender, evacuation, or resistance à l'outrance.

CHAPTER X

THE DUNKIRK BRIDGEHEAD

I

The End of the Belgian Army

THE SITUATION upon the Belgian front was indeed menacing, for the thing was happening which Lord Gort had always feared—namely, that the Belgian Army, in its withdrawal, would be forced away to the north, instead of falling back upon the Yser in contact with the British; and that he would in consequence be left with a wide gap between his left flank and the sea.

Admiral Sir Roger Keyes, who had been carrying out liaison duties with the Belgian Army, took a message in this sense to the King of the Belgians. The reply was discouraging: quite evidently the Belgians were reaching the end of their powers of resistance.

As a last resource, Lord Gort appealed to the Secretary of State for War direct to bring strong pressure to bear upon the Belgian Government to maintain touch with the B.E.F. He sent a similar message to Sir Roger Keyes, but the Admiral's reply was fated never to reach him.

The receipt of the reply could have made little difference, for late upon the following evening, 27th May, Lord Gort was informed by the French General Koeltz, at Dunkirk, that the King of the Belgians had already asked for an armistice as from midnight that night. The blow was none the less staggering because it was fully expected.

"This," says Lord Gort, "was the first intimation I had received of this intention, though I had already formed the opinion that the Belgian Army was now incapable of offering serious or prolonged resistance to the enemy.

"I now found myself faced with an open gap of twenty miles between Ypres and the sea."

It is understood to-day that although the King of the Belgians did in point of fact inform the French Command and Lord Gort of his intention to capitulate, yet the message was so much delayed in transit that the man most vitally concerned first heard the news a bare hour before the time fixed for the surrender.

II

Evacuation Plans

HOWEVER, LORD GORT already had his plans for final withdrawal to a bridgehead at Dunkirk well in hand.

The task fell into two parts—arrangement for the withdrawal of the forward troops, still fighting on extended fronts, and the organisation of a scheme of actual embarkation from Dunkirk and the beaches of the French and Belgian coasts; beginning with all units which were not required to continue the battle, and leaving the fighting troops to the last. Lord Gort himself was fully occupied with the first of these; the second he allotted to Lt.-General Sir Ronald Adam, whose duties as Commander 3rd Corps were now taken over by Major-General S. R. Wason on the morning of 27th May.

Sir Ronald immediately made contact with General Fagalde, in conformity with whose orders he was to act, "provided these did not imperil the safety and welfare of the British troops."

Early that morning a conference was held at Cassel, at which Sir Ronald Adam, Admiral Abrial and General Fagalde, General Blanchard, General Prioux (now in command of the French 1st Army), and General Koeltz (representing General Weygand) were present. It was probably the last time they all saw one another.

From that conference emerged the lay-out of the last bastion of all, the Dunkirk Perimeter. The French were to be responsible roughly for the western half, and the British for the eastern. The news of the Belgian surrender had not yet broken, the Belgian Army was not included in the plan, although the Perimeter could have been extended eastward to include them if necessary.

III

The Dunkirk Perimeter

A BRIEF EXAMINATION of Diagram 3 will reveal the principal features of the Dunkirk Perimeter as it finally emerged. It is no longer necessary, alas, to search the map of Northern France for this unit or that; all are now contained, or will be shortly, within a shallow salient some fifteen miles wide and less than ten miles deep at its deepest, extending from a point on the coast midway between Gravelines and Dunkirk to Nieuport in Belgium. There were no quays or piers except at Dunkirk itself; but at intervals along the dunes lay the little seaside resorts of Coxyde, La Panne, and Malo-les-Bains.

The British sector had its right at Bergues (about seven miles inland from Dunkirk), whence the line travelled, in a north-easterly direction, across the frontier and through Furnes to Nieuport. Canals formed the chief defences, over which the bridges had been destroyed. Inundations were also employed in places.

During 27th May troops and their transport began to withdraw into the Perimeter, and Sir Ronald Adam was soon faced with formidable traffic problems. Where troops had received the necessary orders, vehicles were disabled and abandoned in the assembly areas, but in the circumstances it was inevitable that there should be stragglers and units lacking definite instructions. Refugees, too, impeded progress everywhere.

These difficulties were no sooner cleared up than the French 60th Division began to arrive from Belgium; at the same time rearward elements

of their light mechanised divisions appeared from the south. These were followed by the transport of the French 3rd Corps, mostly horsed. None of these seem to have received any orders to leave their transport outside the Perimeter, and despite the efforts of the British traffic control units, much transport made its way into the Perimeter, adding to the congestion. One even hears stories of French horsed-transport finding its way to the beaches, where ultimately the unfortunate horses, lacking food or water, were cut loose by British soldiers and turned inland.

However, by 28th May Brigadier the Hon. E. F. Lawson, C.R.A., of the 48th Division (lent to Sir Ronald Adam by Major-General Thorne) had succeeded, by what must have been superhuman efforts, in manning the Perimeter from Bergues to Nieuport with a number of units, chiefly artillery.

IV

The Final Withdrawal

But the main body of the B.E.F. were not yet within the Perimeter; nor would be for another forty-eight hours. They were still fighting on two fronts, or rather flanks—in the east, on a line running roughly northward through Armentières and Ypres; and in the west, under increasing pressure, on a line running northward from Hazebrouck to Bergues. In fact, they stood back to back, striving for as long as possible to hold apart the two sides of the corridor of evacuation.

It was a desperate time. Communications were difficult, since everything was on the move, including G.H.Q. and Corps headquarters. Enemy pressure was increasing everywhere, and upon the evening of 27th May came the news of the Belgian capitulation.

There was nothing for it now but to withdraw to the sea, man the Perimeter, and embark as many troops as possible.

There were final difficulties, however, with General Blanchard, whose orders did not at that time correspond with those of Lord Gort. Both had been instructed to form a bridgehead, but General Blanchard, it appeared, had received no orders regarding the actual evacuation of his troops. Moreover General Prioux, commanding the French 1st Army, now sent word to say that his men were unfit for further exertion, and that he proposed to remain where he was, between Bethune and Lille.

It was only at the last moment that, as a result of Lord Gort's earnest and reiterated appeals to French military pride and prestige, 3rd Corps and the Cavalry Corps of the French 1st Army joined the B.E.F. within the Perimeter.

V

A Close Call

BY 30TH MAY THE WHOLE of the B.E.F. had been withdrawn within the Perimeter, after days of desperate rear-guard actions and isolated clashes. To describe these in detail here is impossible; they are a matter for the military historian, and their story will ultimately be told in many technical volumes.

The outstanding peril, however, had been upon the left flank, where the Belgian surrender had left open the twenty-mile gap already mentioned, through which German tanks and mobile troops were now pouring with Nieupoort as their objective. The bridge across the canal at Nieupoort a most substantial affair, had not been blown, and the enemy actually succeeded in establishing a bridgehead in the town itself. It must have been a scene of wild confusion. Some German troops attempted to cross in rubber boats; others mingled with the troops of refugees, disguised even as nuns.

But they got no further. The 4th Division was now in position, and held firm, assisted by the shelling of enemy troops along the coast by ships of the Royal Navy. It had been a near thing, but that gap was closed.

Embarkation had already begun, and was to continue. And now it is time to examine the arrangements made by the Admiralty and home authorities, which, with the devoted assistance of the Royal Air Force were to bring the battered but undefeated B.E.F. safely to Dover.

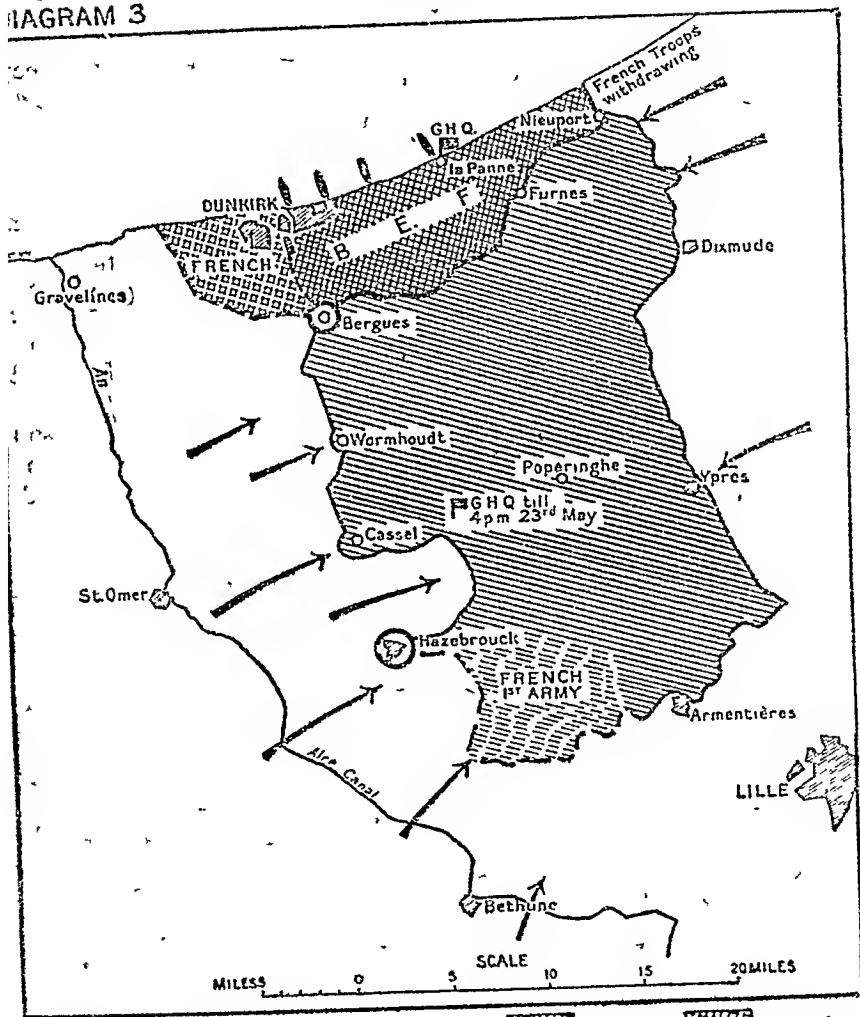
But before we do so, before our operations on land become merged with those upon the sea, let us look back for a moment.

The outstanding point to observe—and it emerges again and again—is this, that throughout the strain and turmoil of these nightmare weeks, with overwhelming pressure upon each front and a demoralised and crumbling ally on either flank, there never seems at any time to have been loss of heart or head, or failure to rise to one desperate emergency after another on the part of the B.E.F. And that applies with equal truth to those who led and those who followed.

SITUATION OF B. E. F.

28TH MAY, 1940.AND
31ST MAY, 1940.

DIAGRAM 3



British Line Allied Line

British

French

Beaches

German panzer divisions



British



French

Showing approximate positions on 31st May
after withdrawal to the Dunkirk perimeter
(Dunkirk perimeter indicated by
heavy black line)

CHAPTER XI

THALASSA, THALASSA !

I


The Situation on the Beaches

LORD GORT HIMSELF was now within the Perimeter, at his new and final headquarters at La Panne—for many months the General Headquarters of King Albert of Belgium and the remnants of his little Army, during the Great War.

The B.E.F. had taken up their allotted sectors within the Perimeter, with 1st Corps on the right, from Bergues to the frontier, and 2nd Corps on the left, from the frontier, through Furnes, to the Nieuport bridgehead. 3rd Corps held the canal running south from Dunkirk to Bergues, including Bergues itself.

Upon the afternoon of Tuesday, 28th May, Lord Gort received the reports of Sir Ronald Adam and the Quartermaster-General regarding the embarkation situation. These were not too optimistic.

“No ship could be loaded at the docks at Dunkirk, and few wounded could be evacuated. There was no water at Dunkirk and very little on the beaches. The naval plans were not yet in full operation, and 20,000 men were waiting to be taken off. . . . The area was congested with French and Belgian troops and their transport, as well as with refugees.”

However, 10,000 men had already been embarked ; and the two generals were of the opinion that the troops could be gradually evacuated, and kept supplied with food from home until the operation was completed—given reasonable immunity from air attack. 

Yes, there was the rub. Could that immunity be secured? Intensive bombing of these exposed beaches, continued long enough, must mean the annihilation of the B.E.F. Lord Gort accordingly communicated the gist of the report to the C.I.G.S. asking for the advice and instructions of His Majesty's Government in the event of a crisis. He received two replies.

The first was a telegram of encouragement and good wishes from His Majesty the King, which was immediately communicated to all ranks, and heartened them mightily. - The second was from the Secretary of State :—

“ If you are cut off from us, and all evacuation from Dunkirk and the beaches had, in your judgment been finally prevented after every attempt to open it had failed, you would become sole judge of when it was impossible to inflict further damage on the enemy.”

Lord Gort was thus empowered, by implication, if he found himself and his force isolated and at the end of their resources, to avoid further useless sacrifice of life by surrender to the enemy.

But he was never isolated : the Navy and Air Force saw to that. And the British soldier is never quite at the end of his resources.

II

Aid by Sea and Air

THE ADMIRALTY HAD PLACED the naval arrangements for embarkation in the hands of the Dover Command, and nobly did they rise to the occasion. A Senior Naval Officer was immediately sent to Dunkirk to work out detailed plans, and in a surprisingly short time, considering the difficulties of the undertaking, a flotilla of small ships, boats, and odd craft were collected for the purpose of carrying the troops out from the beaches to the deep-water vessels waiting for them.

Beaches were organised at La Panne, Bray Dunes, and Malo-les-Bains, one being allotted to each Corps, and military beach parties were improvised upon each Corps beach. The start was slow, for soldiers are not sailors, and were unhandy with the boats on a falling tide ; upon the first day not more than two hundred men were embarked. Thereafter matters improved rapidly. More naval units arrived, and supplies of food, water, and ammunition were despatched from England to the beaches. Enemy activity was such that few of the earlier consignments reached their destination ; but some got through, and more came later.

By 29th May naval arrangements were in running order, and the miracle of deliverance had begun.

The difficulties, of course, were enormous. There was perpetual bombing. On 27th May Dunkirk was set on fire, and a pall of black smoke from burning oil-tanks hung over the port and impeded the view of the

anti-aircraft gunners. The inner harbour was blocked, except for small ships. Dunkirk was therefore cleared of troops, who were sent to the dunes east of the town to await embarkation. The port itself was manned by naval ratings, and continued to function somehow until the very end, embarking troops in numbers which far exceeded expectation.

Bombing and shelling grew more and more severe. There was a particularly heavy attack upon 29th May, when the port and the beaches both suffered severely. Nevertheless the fighter aircraft of the Royal Air Force, by heroic exertion, succeeded in intercepting a large proportion of the enemy attacks. "Those attacks which arrived," says Lord Gort, "though at times serious, were never able to impede our embarkation for long."

III

The French Troops

FURTHER COMPLICATIONS were occasioned, as already indicated, by the arrival in the Perimeter of more than 100,000 French troops, most of them with their transport.

Apart from the congestion caused, their presence raised the question of embarkation in an acute form. Admiral Abrial, it seemed, had received no orders from his Government that the whole of the British troops were to be embarked; he was under the impression that the main body of the B.E.F. would defend the Perimeter to the last, side by side with the French, and seemed surprised that any other course of action should be contemplated.

Lord Gort immediately sent Sir Ronald Adam to make known to the Admiral the orders which had been received from His Majesty's Government, and which were now in process of being carried out.

This point having been made clear, another immediately obtruded itself. It was obvious that the French troops now expected to be evacuated to England with their British comrades. Unfortunately no steps had been taken by French authorities to provide ships for this purpose.

In the end, as an interim measure pending definite instructions from the War Office, Lord Gort allotted two British ships to the French forthwith, and gave up to them the beach at Malo-les-Bains for their own use.

Orders were subsequently received from home that British and French troops were to embark in equal proportions—a quixotic but characteristic decision.

IV

Lord Gort Completes his Task

THE MANNING OF THE PERIMETER had been completed upon 29th May, and Sir Ronald Adam, his difficult duty successfully accomplished, was ordered to embark next day.

The evacuation of troops was now proceeding steadily, despite all that the enemy could do. 3rd Corps went first, then 2nd. As they departed the Perimeter was reduced in size, for enemy pressure was growing more and more severe, and it was only prudent to concentrate now round the permanent defences of Dunkirk itself.

By 30th May there remained some 80,000 British troops, out of a total of 250,000. Lord Gort's long and arduous task was approaching completion, and the burden of an overpowering responsibility was about to be lifted from his shoulders. He now received a telegram from the Secretary of State, apprising him of the fact.

"Continue to defend present perimeter to the utmost, in order to cover maximum evacuation, now proceeding well If we can still communicate with you we shall send you an order to return to England with such officers as you may choose, at the moment when we deem your command so reduced that it can be handed to a Corps Commander. You should now nominate this commander. If communications are broken, you are to hand over and return, as specified, when your effective fighting force does not exceed equivalent of three divisions. This is in accordance with correct military procedure, and no personal discretion is left to you in the matter. . . . The Corps Commander chosen by you should be ordered to carry on defence and evacuation with French, whether from Dunkirk or beaches"

In other words, the focal centre of the conflict had now shifted from France to Britain. The Battle of Flanders was almost over; at any moment the Battle of Britain might begin. Still, it must have been a keen and bitter disappointment to such a soldier and leader as Lord Gort not to be the last man to quit those stricken beaches.

However, his orders intentionally gave him no option, and he carried them out without demur or delay. On the afternoon of 31st May he informed Major-General the Hon. H. R. L. G. Alexander that he had selected him to remain in France in command of the 1st Corps, now numbering less than 20,000 men, and passed on to him the instructions

which he himself had received from His Majesty's Government, which were that he was to operate under Admiral Abrial and assist the French in the final defence of Dunkirk.

The same evening Lord Gort embarked, in H.M.S. *Hebe*, and sailed for England at 2 a.m. next morning.

He had the satisfaction of knowing that 80 per cent. of his forces had been extricated by his and their exertions, backed by the unswerving courage and devotion of the Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force, from what had more than once looked like a hopeless position.

"At this time," he observes in a final note, "the withdrawal of 2nd Corps was proceeding according to plan, but under increasing enemy pressure by land and air; the troops were moving to their places on the beaches steadily and in good order. The plans made by the Admiralty to provide small craft were by now in full operation; embarkation was proceeding far more smoothly than it had yet done, and was favoured by a calm sea that night."

In all, 211,532 fit men and 13,053 casualties were embarked at Dunkirk and the beaches, in addition to 112,546 allied troops, of whom all but a very few were French.

V

The Final Scene

WITH LORD GORT'S DEPARTURE his Despatch comes automatically to an end, without any description of the final evacuation of the B.E.F. But little of the tale remains to be told. Steadily the work went on; less and less crowded grew the beaches, and the last units were embarked forty-eight hours later.

The story of Dunkirk has already become history. You may read it in the pages of the Poet Laureate's epic narrative, *The Nine Days' Wonder*, or gather it from the lips of any of the thousands who actually figured in it. There is no need to enlarge upon the theme here.

Yet perhaps it is permissible, in closing, to record the impressions of one of the volunteers who toiled throughout the final hours of the evacuation, pulling an oar in one of the small boats which plied unceasingly between the beach of Dunkirk and a steamer waiting off-shore.

"There they stood," he said, "lined up like a bus-queue, right from the dunes, down the shore, to the water's edge, and sometimes up to their waists beyond. They were as patient and orderly, too, as people in an

ordinary bus-queue. There were bombers overhead and artillery fire all around them. They were hungry and thirsty and dead-beat ; yet they kept in line, and no one tried to steal a march on any one else. Most of them even managed to summon up an occasional joke or wisecrack.

"The one thing I shall never forget, though—the picture that will always haunt me—was the look in the faces of the men while we were filling up another boatload. Would there be room for them in this lot—or—? You could see anxious eyes counting the heads in front, and calculating chances. Then, as we paddled away, loaded to the gunnel, the face of the man left at the head of the queue—the man who had *just* missed—grinning resolutely, and wishing us luck, and wondering in his heart if we should be able to manage another trip !"

They did manage another trip, and more yet, and in the end every soul was taken off.

At midnight upon Sunday, 2nd June, Major General Alexander and the Senior Naval officer (Captain W. G. Tennant, R.N.) made a final tour of the beaches and harbour in a motor boat ; and, "on being satisfied that no British troops were left on shore, they themselves left for England."

The First Round was over—and there had been no knock-out.

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